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When rustlers ride, too much range savvy can make the wrong man look bad

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Answering a call for gun help, outlaw Littlejohn runs afoul a scurvy crew

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Dawson didn't believe in ghosts—particularly those who toted six-guns!

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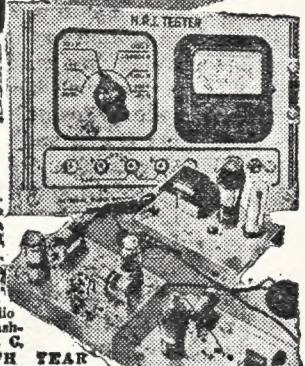

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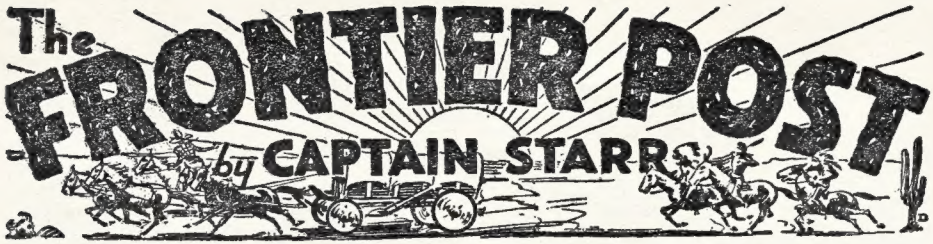

HIYA, gals and galluses! One day, while poking along a rough, narrow road, I came onto a small, sleepy backwoods hamlet. The "business section" consisted of a cracker-barrel store with a gas pump sprouting out of a mudhole in front of it. The only visible sign of activity, as I recollect, was a spotted hound dog on the sagging porch, scratching a flea on its left ear with a right hind foot.

That was the summer before Pearl Harbor.

In the ten years since, this place strangely-named "Sweet Home" has leaped into national notice as the fastest-growing town in the United States, in the fastest-growing state of Oregon.

What a Change!

Sweet Home isn't so very big even yet. But the 1950 census shows a population increase from 1500 to 3620, a gain of 232 percent. The hound dog isn't around any more. Leastwise, I didn't see it on my recent return. The cracker-barrel store had been swallowed up in a busy, modern downtown, all a-glitter with plate glass fronts and neon lights. On the outskirts big lumber mills spouted fire, smoke and noise night and day.

The dense fir forest, for miles around, has turned to raw, ugly stumpland. Sweet Home prospers on a crop no man planted. When that crop is exhausted, what will become of Sweet Home? That I wonder often when I look upon the logging boomtowns of the Pacific Northwest.

Sweet Home, in case you haven't got a map handy, is on the wet, western slope of the Cascades, about a hundred miles south of Portland. It's a day's jump from there to the fastest-growing region in the United States —southwestern Oregon, with its 59 percent population increase since 1940.

Timber isn't the only resource in that area, as you regular Frontier Post folks know from reading about "the outlaw County of Curry" in one of our get-togethers about three years back. One of the attractions for homeseekers is the extraordinarily mild climate along the coast, a condition produced by the close inshore sweep of a warm ocean current in the vicinity of Gold Beach and Brookings. Those towns lay proud claim to gentler winters than many other sections hundreds of miles southward, in California.

This stretch of coast was the scene of the remarkable Easter lily boom in which small farmers grew rich almost overnight, and which was first told about here in the Frontier Post, along with the exciting salmon fishing and magnificent scenery.

Which proves all over again, if you hanker to know what's going on from Texas west, don't miss a single issue of TEXAS RANGERS Magazine.

Raising Chinchillas

A new craze for "growing rich overnight" has hit all over, from Texas west. It's chinchilla-raising. I don't know a whole lot about these fur-bearing South American rock rabbits, except that breeders sell for $1000 a pair.

A man just over the hill from where I am now has 300 pairs, most of which he raised himself. He can look you squarely in the eye and turn down a thumping quarter-million dollars for the lot of them, which makes raising chinchies look like a heap better proposition than the "fox farm racket" that ran its course.

For such expensive little critters, chinchillas are mighty economical in upkeep. I'm told it costs only $2 a year to feed one. Their diet consists of alfalfa hay, wheat bran spiked with powdered milk and rabbit pellets.

Last winter a friend of mine coaxed a pair out of somebody—for one thousand cash—and now has four with more on the way. Keeps 'em in a pen in a back bedroom, claiming they're absolutely odorless. Never did

keep the house locked before, but does now, as you can easy understand. Chinchilla rustling has got to be sort of tempting in some circles that find it hard to laugh off a thousand smackers for two fancy rats.

Padlocks and Pistols

Which puts me in mind of a statement made right recent by the FBI, in which it's estimated that the theft loss in United States—from sneak thievery to bank holdups—amounts to a whacking half-billion dollars a year!

The biggest, brightest change that could come to the world would be if everybody turned honest. Ever get to thinking along those lines? The sad part of the whole thing is that just a small percentage of human varmints are crooked. It's on account of these that the rest of us need padlocks, police, pistols and insurance policies.

It might be a good thing for civilization if known thieves were branded and so could be identified and known among upright men. I've heard tell about an old Injun chief named Morongo who yanked out a knife and whacked both ears off a youngster to cure him of the swiping habit.

"Boy, him too young to whip," explained soft-hearted Morongo.

That 49th Star

Texas soon surrenders her proud claim as the largest state, with the approaching statehood of Alaska, which contains 586,400 square miles to 265,896 square miles of Texas. But it won't happen right sudden. Even if there's no hitch, it may be as long as three years yet before that 49th star is added to our flag.

When Texas entered the Union, it was a simple ceremony. But even if the Senate passes the statehood bill by the time you read this, a heap of fummydiddles remain. Here are the many steps:

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3.—Ninety days thereafter, the convention assembles, will spend about 75 days creating a state constitution.

4.—About 100 days after adjournment comes an election to submit the constitution

(Continued on page 90)

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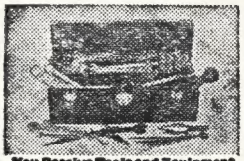

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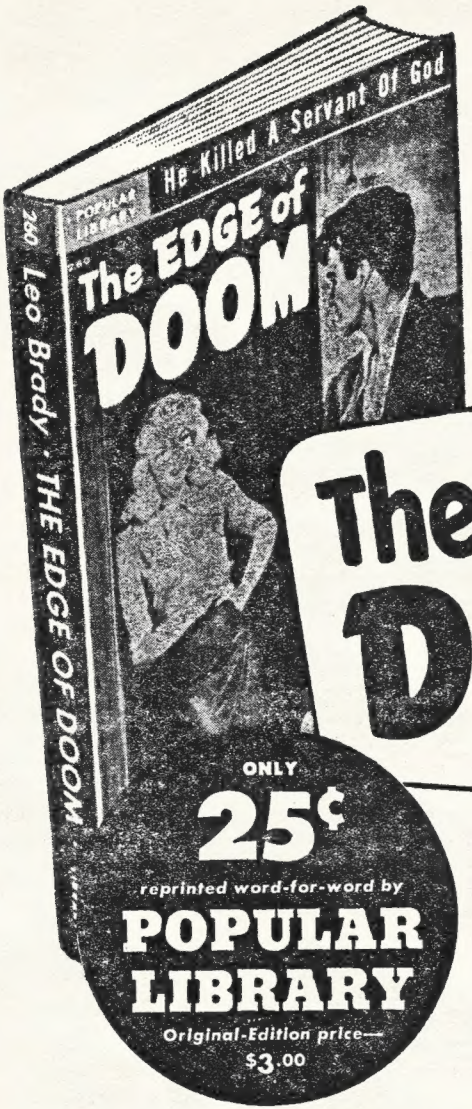

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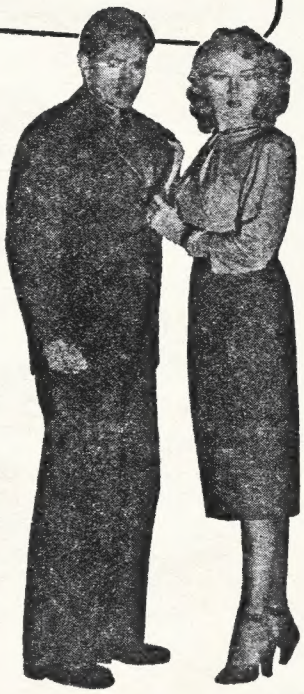

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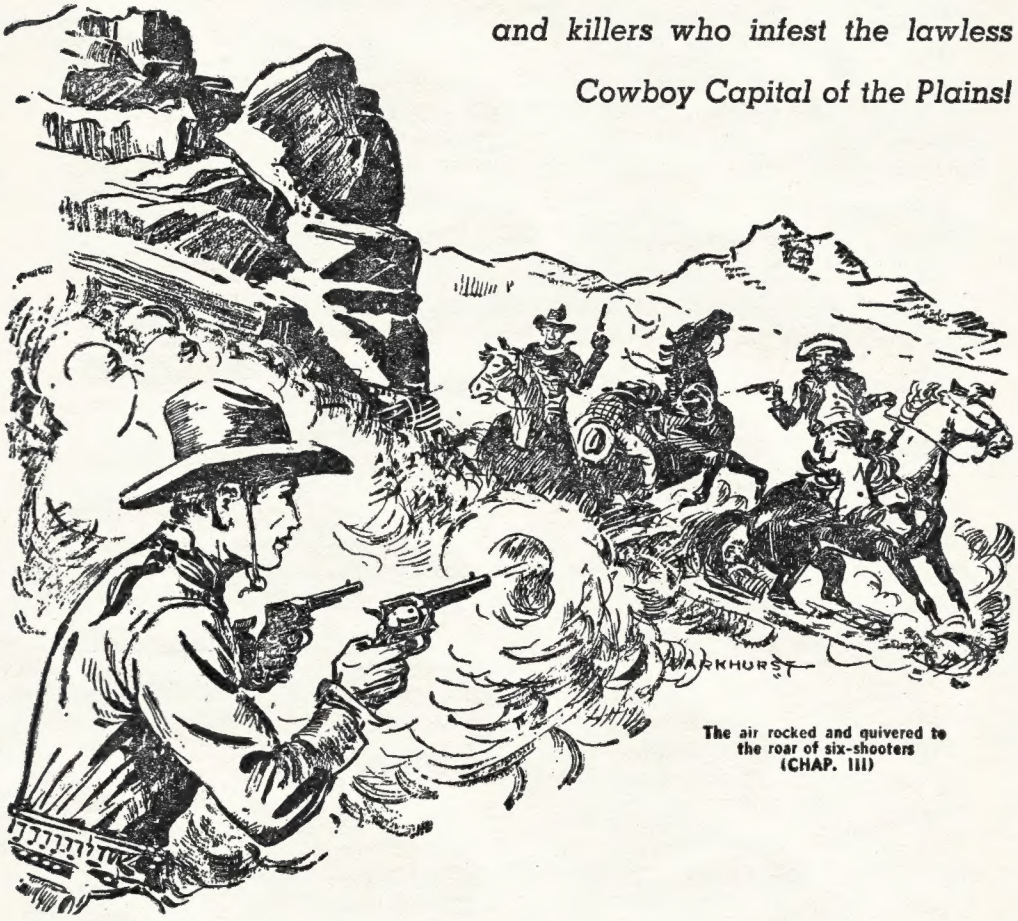


The air rocked and quivered to the roar of six-shooters (CHAP. III)

the BLOODY YEARS

CHAPTER I

Horseman of the Plains

IT WAS not the seat of the covered wagon, the trudging feet of the prospector, or the pounding deck of the locomotive that bore the star of empire westward. It was the shaggy back of the Texas longhorn. It was the longhorn, bleating and rumbling across a thousand miles of sage and cactus that destroyed the myth of the Great American Desert that for a century had been considered a barrier to settlement.

The longhorn, and his guide and guard, the cowboy, opened up the

Jim Hatfield Pits Himself Against the Deadly

vast region that was to become the heart of America. Over this mighty principality the Indian had ruled supreme. The explorer, the trapper, the soldier, the miner and the emigrant had not challenged the priority of the tribes. It remained for the cattleman to take over where these others merely *passed* over. The herds beat out the trails for others to run upon. The cowman united North and South in this vast land, wiping out in a decade the feuds engendered by the Civil War.

And the source of this mighty force that was to leave its impress for generations was Texas. For from Texas came the stream of cow critters that beat down the prairie grasses, banished the buffalo, and subjugated the Indian tribes.

The Texas Panhandle was the heart of the Great American "desert," a land of rushing streams, of sunny plains, of grass of a luxuriance beyond belief. In short, the ideal land for cattle. And into the Panhandle rolled the longhorns when the pastures of the Brazos, the Nueces, and the Trinity became overstocked. With great herds came prosperity, turbulence and disorder. Wideloopers and owlhoot bands found rich pickings.

On the north bank of the South Canadian River birthed and grew a town called Tascosa, which was to enjoy the dubious honor of being known as the "Cowboy Capital of the Plains."

Tascosa was wild and considerably woolly. Wild yells, discordant sounds, jangling music, pistol shots and the clatter of hoofs on board sidewalks theoretically reserved for pedestrians were familiar sounds. Alcohol quickened tempers flared into tragic gunplay.

An abortive cowboy strike set the rangeland in an uproar. Followed a systematic, steadily increasing period of widelooping and robbery, with nobody sure just who was responsible for the outrages.

ALARMED citizens of Tascosa and nearby Amarillo decided something must be done. From Tascosa poured a flood of letters. From Amarillo, telegrams flowed in addition to letters. Ranchers also went in heavily for correspondence, loaded with pungent comments anent the powerlessness of local authorities to cope with the situation.

In Ranger Post headquarters, Captain Bill McDowell, the famed commander of the Border Battalion, glowered at the heap of missives on his desk and said things that would not look well in print. With a final sulphurous castigation of the entire Panhandle and a frank prediction as to its ultimate destination, he turned to his clerk.

"Go find Jim Hatfield, and find him quick," he ordered. "Tell him to rattle his hocks here pronto. I think he's over to Doc Chesney's office gabbin' with that spavined old coot. Move!"

The clerk moved. Folks usually moved when Captain Bill used that tone. In a surprisingly short time he was back with a companion whose long eyes of a peculiar shade of green showed an amused expression as they rested on the irate old commander.

"What's so blasted funny?" Captain Bill demanded indignantly.

Hatfield's rather wide mouth quirked slightly at the corners, relieving somewhat the sternness evidenced by the prominent high-bridged nose above and the powerful chin and jaw beneath. He pushed back his broad-brimmed "J.B." and ruffled his thick black hair with slender, bronzed fingers.

"I was just thinking of something Doc said," he replied reminiscently.

"What was that?" growled McDowell.

"He said," Hatfield replied gravely, "that impatience, bad temper and general cantankerousness were always signs of advancing age."

Captain Bill jumped to his feet and hammered the desk top with a blacksmith's blows.

"Why, that ever-lastingly be-blowed old decrepit fossil!" he roared. "Takin' a dig at me, per usual, eh? Why if I had half the bad temper of that ringy old coot I'd go drown myself in a trough of sheep dip! Signs of advancing age! He sure ain't no yearlin' himself. He got pickled on red-eye along with Noah right after the Flood."

Hatfield shook with soundless mirth. Captain Bill glared and rumbled, then suddenly let out a throaty chuckle. He regarded his lieutenant and most important aide, with a twinkle in his frosty old eyes.

Captain Bill was himself a stalwart six-footer, but he had to raise his eyes considerably to meet Hatfield's level green graze. He chuckled again, and dropped back into his chair.

JIM HATFIELD

"Sit down, Jim," he said. "Got something more important to talk about than that sod pawin' old pill roller."

He selected several letters and telegrams from the pile on his desk and passed them to Hatfield.

The man whom an observant old Lieutenant of Rangers had named the Lone Wolf read them without comment and passed them back to the Captain.

"Well?" he said.

"Well," said Captain Bill, "the time's comin' when we'll have to establish a post at Amarillo, I'd say. But right now I haven't got the men to spare. Things appear to be gettin' sort of woolly up there. I don't put much stock in them yarns of mysterious night riders nobody can catch, and so on. Just a reg'lation bunch of wide-loopers operatin' I'd say. But there's no doubt but there's been plenty of ruckus raisin' goin' on and had ought to be looked into." He paused, tugging his mustache. Hatfield waited expectantly. "Yes, I reckon a mite of goin' over up there is in order," McDowell pursued.

HE PAUSED again. "You were up once, weren't you, Jim?" he said abruptly.

"About three years back," Hatfield replied. "I trailed Carlos Moro, the train robber and rustler, up there from the Brazos country."

"And didn't catch him," commented Captain Bill.

"That's right," Hatfield agreed soberly. "I got there too late. Moro got into a gun fight with a bunch of cowhands on the south bank of the Canadian River. The punchers did for most of the bunch. They shot Moro in the head. He went into the Canadian and didn't come up. The whole section was buzzing about it when I got there. So I came back."

"And nobody up there knew you for a Ranger?"

"Reckon not," Hatfield admitted. "I didn't advertise it and there wasn't any reason for me to hang around long. I stayed overnight in Tascosa, stopped at Amarillo on my way back."

"All sounds good," said Captain Bill. "It's a long ride, but suppose you mosey up there for a look-see, if you don't mind the ride."

"Reckon I can stand it," Hatfield smiled, his even teeth flashing startlingly white in his bronzed face. "Goldy needs to stretch his legs a mite. He's getting fat with nothing to do but put on the nosebag regular. It will do us both good."

"You've got the darnedest notions about what's good for you," snorted Captain Bill. "Say, you did for two of Moro's bunch, didn't you?"

"Yes, when we had the run-in with them over on the Brazos," Hatfield told him. "I was with those other Rangers, Arlington and O'Neil and Bridges then, you know. On that chore you sent me to Arlington about. I didn't get a chance to line sights

with Moro himself. Didn't get much of a look at him. All I remember seeing was hair. He had a tremendous black beard spreading all over his shirt front, and his head hair hung down over his collar to his shoulders. He was a wild-looking hellion and as wild as he looked.

"What happened?" asked Captain Bill.

"He got away from that ruckus with most of his bunch," said Hatfield. "Arlington and his men had their hands full on the Brazos, but I trailed after Moro and the others who got away. They were headed for their old stamping grounds on the Canadian, I've a notion, or maybe for Oklahoma. Chances are they would have made it and gotten in the clear if they hadn't made the mistake of stopping to make a try for Shannon Pierce's money-loaded chuckwagon."

"So?" said the Ranger captain, leaning back in his chair.

"So they bit off a bit more than they could chaw. It was during the running fight with Pierce's hands that Moro got his come-uppance and what was left of his bunch were scattered. Good thing Moro was done for. He was plumb bad—and he had brains. The others were just ordinary owlhoot brand. Nothing particularly outstanding about any of them that I know of."

"You got a look at any of 'em?"

"Yeah, I do remember one had a bad scar on the side of his face. I got a good look at him just as they went through the herd of cows that bunched right afterward and held us up long enough for them to get a head start."

"What held you up?'

"It was just beginning to get dark and by the time we got untangled from those critters they were plumb out of sight. No following their trail till next morning, which gave them considerable of an advantage."

Captain Bill nodded. "Well," he said, "it looks like a bunch just as bad is maverickin' around the Canadian River country 'right now. Reckon you're looking forward to a pleasant ride and a nice time. So long, Jim."

A little later, tall and graceful atop his great golden horse, an expression of pleased anticipation in his strangely colored eyes, Jim Hatfield rode off to a rendezvous with death.

CHAPTER II

A Ranger Rides

THE route Hatfield rode was much the same as that he had taken in pursuit of the elusive Carlos Moro, three years before. It was a long trail and he did not push Goldy, his great golden sorrel.

After nearly two weeks of steady riding he reached Amarillo, the bustling railroad town that he could not guess then was destined to become the metropolis of the Panhandle. His ultimate goal was Tascosa, on the north bank of the Canadian, but he decided to spend a night in Amarillo to give his horse a breather. Also he hoped to get something of a low-down on conditions in the section.

Amarillo had already come a long way from its humble beginning. Years before, a group of buffalo hunters had thrown together a number of shacks and called the place Ragtown. The shacks were chiefly buffalo-hide huts. The settlement had served as a supply depot and shipping point for the buffalo hunters then sweeping the last of the great herds from the prairie. Ragtown's hotel had partitions, walls and roofs made of buffalo hides, and did a roaring business.

The vanishing of the buffalo had been taken in its stride by Ragtown. Thrifty gentlemen with business acumen had realized there was money to be made from the countless tons of buffalo bones bleaching on the plains. Ragtown became the center of the bone-gathering industry, the bones being shipped East to be ground into fertilizer.

Just about the time the bones were becoming scarce, along came the cattlemen, who were the first real settlers of the town-to-be. The site was moved to the southeast, to the banks of a body of water to be known as Amarillo or Wild Horse Lake. The railroad that had ambled into town blithely built a station and stockyards on the lake bank.

It was in the middle of a long dry spell. Came the rains. The lake rose and station and stock yard were soon standing in

four feet of water. They were moved. The town became known as Oneida. It continued to grow, took in the former site of Ragtown, and the name was changed again to Amarillo, and in time became the metropolis of the Panhandle.

Hatfield's first care in riding into the distant town was for his horse. He located a livery stable and made sure all Goldy's wants were provided for, before he considered his own needs, and made inquiries.

"Reckon the First Chance, right around the corner, is about as good a place to eat as any," the stablekeeper answered his question. "The likker ain't bad, either, and if you care for a whirl at cards or the wheel, the games are straight. Right next door is the Empire Hotel. You can get a bed there. No bugs, except the proprietor, and you don't have to sleep with him. Don't worry about your cayuse. He will be here when you want him. I got a ten-gauge sawed-off what says he will. Haven't had a horse lifted out of here since I set up in business."

"It's tried often?" asked Hatfield quizzically, and the liveryman scowled.

"Well, one jigger tried it, but he ain't around any more."

"Where is he?" Hatfield asked curiously.

"Buryin' ground is over to the north end of town," the stablekeeper grunted as he emptied oats into Goldy's manger.

Hatfield left the stable chuckling.

The recommended First Chance proved to be a big combination saloon and restaurant. Hatfield had a drink at the bar and surveyed the busy room with interest. Aside from a considerable number of town folks, most of the customers appeared to be cowhands.

"But I've a notion some of them haven't been overly acquainted with ropes or branding irons for quite a spell," the Lone Wolf mused as he sipped his drink. "Uh-huh, some salty-looking gents here. And they say this pueblo is mild compared with Tascosa! I'd ought to have a nice time in this section."

HATFIELD himself attracted more than a little attention as he sauntered to a nearby table and ordered a meal. The barkeep who had poured his

The stout rope held, but for a moment Jim feared the task was too great for his strength (CHAP. VIII)

drink shook his head and growled in an undertone to a fellow worker:

"We're sure gettin' some prize specimens here of late. And that looks to be the big he-wolf of the pack. Did you see them eyes? And look at the way them black-handled guns is slung. Low down, butts slantin' to the front, cut-out holsters. And the size of him! Gentlemen, hush! Wonder who in blazes he is?"

"Might be Pat Garrett, the Arizona sheriff and marshal," hazarded his confrere. "I heerd he come from this section, and was expected back."

The barkeep shook his head. "Nope. This feller ain't Garrett. I saw Garrett once. This feller is taller, and bigger all around. I got a prime notion this jigger is on the other side of the fence. Garrett is a law officer."

But the bartender's interest was decidedly casual as compared to that of three hard-looking individuals seated at a corner table. All three nearly leaped from their chairs when the Lone Wolf entered.

"It's *him!*" exclaimed one of them, a swarthy, heavily bearded man with an enormous spread of shoulders.

"It is, sure as shooting'!" quavered a companion, a scrawny little rat-faced fellow with a cast in one eye.

"What in blazes?" asked the other member of the unsavory trio, a long and lanky and sallow individual.

"What's him? What's the matter with you fellers?"

"It's the big hellion who was with Ironhand Arlington when we had the run-in with the Rangers down on the Brazos!" mouthed Whiskers. "I told you about that, Frazer. It wasn't Arlington who trapped us. It was that big sidewinder. Arlington is bad enough, but this one is a helluva sight worse. What's he doin' up here?"

"You sure it's the same feller?" asked the man called Frazer.

"Am I sure! If you'd ever seed that devil lookin' at you over a gun barrel, you'd know him next time if it was at the bottom of a well at midnight! I still drag my left leg from seein' him the first time. Am I right, Slink?"

"You're darn right you are, Gulden," whimpered the little man who was the third of the trio. "So right that I say let's get out of here."

"Easy," rumbled the man called Gulden. "I don't reckon he got much of a look at you that time, Slink. You were too darn far off, per usual. And I don't look just the same as I did then, either. He never saw Frazer here. Sit tight. We ain't got nothin' to worry about, right now. But we got plenty comin'. Why's he here? The boss will throw a conniption duck fit when he hears about this."

"One thing's sure," whined Slink. "He's got to be got rid of, and pronto."

"Ought to be easy," rasped the sinister-looking Frazer. "There's three of us. We can get into a ruckus with him and—"

"And die!" spat Gulden. "There ain't a man in the Southwest who can shade him on the draw, and he never misses. If he was plugged through the heart he'd keep pullin' trigger till his gun was empty. We've got to use savvy."

"Maybe we'd better wait till we see the boss," quavered Slink.

"Can't take the time," differed Gulden. "We've got to handle this right now. Slink, you're the best at this sort of thing. It's up to you to keep that hellion in sight and learn what he's aimin' to do. I don't figure he'll hang around Amarillo any length of time. You can keep an eye on him. Find out if he aims to head for the canyon. My guess is he's headin' for Tascosa. If he does, everything is made to order for us. Slide out of here, Slink, and keep your eyes skun."

The little man, shooting furtive glances at Hatfield's broad back, eased out of his chair and glided snakelike through the swinging doors.

UNCONSCIOUS of this bit of by-play, Hatfield enjoyed a leisurely meal, smoked a cigarette and left the saloon. He had no difficulty in acquiring accommodations at the Empire Hotel next door, a towering structure all of two stories high. The bed in the room assigned to him was comfortable, and he slept well. The next morning he had breakfast in the First Chance, listened for a while to snatches of conversation at the bar and tables.

Finally he pinched out his cigarette butt and rose to his feet. He had decided that nothing was to be gained by hanging around Amarillo.

"Tascosa's my best bet," he told himself

as he headed for the stable and his horse.

Holed up across the street, the furtive Slink saw him ride out of town. He hurried to a dingy rum-hole at the corner of a nearby alley and found his two unsavory companions waiting expectantly.

"He took the trail northwest," Slink announced. "He's goin' to Tascosa, all right."

The whiskered Gulden stood up and tightened his gun-belt.

"Okay," he rambled. "We're ridin' northwest too. I know a cut-off from that trail that's made to order for us. Get your broncs and let's sift sand. This business will be took care of before evenin'. He'll hafta ride west almost to Vega, then turn more to the north. We'll cut across his track and wait our chance."

Hatfield rode at a good pace, but did not push his horse. He had nearly fifty miles to cover over rough ground.

"We'll just take it easy," he told Goldy in the way of a lonely man who confides in his horse. "If we have to camp out a night, that's all right, too."

Early afternoon found him riding along the base of a long slope that climbed upward in a series of benches to a ragged rimrock standing out hard and clear against the blue of the sky. From force of habit, his keen eyes constantly scanned the terrain ahead and on either side. Finally his attention became firmly fixed on the brush-grown slope to his left.

"Feller," he told the sorrel, "there's a couple of jiggers pacing us on that upper bench. Twice I've caught a glimpse of them, although they seem to be trying hard to keep under cover. Now what's this all about? Reckon we'd better try and get the low-down on it. They're a mite too far off to do any lead-slinging in our direction, but the brush is thick up there and they could slide closer without much trouble."

He scanned the lay of the land ahead, formulating a plan of action. A little later he swerved around a bend and observed that a stand of much taller growth hid the bench above.

"Which means they can't see us down here, either," he muttered.

For some distance the trail ran straight between the walls of tall growth. Then it began to bend in a westerly direction. Hatfield spoke to Goldy and the sorrel instantly quickened his pace. They reached the bend and Hatfield's voice rang out, urgent, compelling:

"Trail, Goldy, trail!"

The great sorrel shot forward, his irons drumming the ground. For nearly a mile Hatfield sent him ahead at a dead run. Constanty he scanned the slope to the left. Abruptly he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction and slowed the horse.

"Easy going from here up to that shelf," he told Goldy as he swerved him to the left. "Take it, feller, then we'll hole up and wait for those inquisitive gents to come ambling along. I have a sort of hankering to ask 'em why they're so interested in us."

Some distance below the bench, Hatfield left Goldy in a dense thicket. Then he made his way to the upper shelf, rolled a cigarette and leaned comfortably against a tree. Only a few yards to the south the bench curved around a bulge. The approaching riders would come into view before they would have a chance to spot him. The advantage was all on his side.

BUT for once the Lone Wolf was a mite careless and a trifle over-confident. He did not anticipate trouble. He was of the opinion that the men who had so persistently shadowed him all day were motivated only by the curiosity aroused by any stranger suddenly appearing in the section.

"Chances are they just hanker to know why I'm here and who I am," he mused. "They could likely as not be a couple of peace officers keeping tabs on a new arrival. I've a notion that coming onto me unexpected this way will sort of give 'em a startle. They may let slip some information before they calm down."

While Hatfield smoked his cigarette to a short butt there was silence broken only by the twittering of the birds and the sough of the wind through the branches. Then abruptly he straightened, thumbs hooked over his cartridge belts. To his ears had come a faint clicking sound that swiftly became louder, the beat of fast hoofs on the hard ground. Tense and alert the Lone Wolf waited while the approaching hoofbeats drew nearer and nearer. Another moment and three horsemen bulged around the bend. Instantly things happened with bewildering speed and utter unexpectedness.

The riders uttered yelps of alarm and jerked their mounts to a plunging, slithering halt.

"Look out!" yelled a voice. "It's him!"

CHAPTER III

Tascosa

WITH their horses still skating over the stones, the three men went for their guns. Hatfield's hands flashed down and up. The air rocked and quivered to a roar of six-shooters.

One of the horsemen spun sideward in his saddle and thudded to the ground. Another howled with pain as a bullet seared his flesh. At the same instant Hatfield reeled back under the impact of a terrific blow to his left leg. The wounded limb buckled under him and he went down.

He rolled over and shot with both hands as fast as he could pull trigger.

The wounded horseman slumped forward on his horse's neck and slid out of the hull. The third man, a burly bearded individual with a rage-distorted face and blazing eyes, bellowed a curse, fired a last shot and whirled his mount.

Back around the bulge he crashed, with lead whining past his ears. Then Hatfield's gun hammers clicked on empty shells.

Gasping with pain, the Lone Wolf struggled to his feet. His leg felt numb and wooden, but to his intense relief, he found it would support his weight.

"Bone not busted, anyway," he muttered as he ejected the spent shells from his gun. As he replaced them with fresh cartridges, he was listening to the beat of hoofs dimming away in the distance. Holstering the sixes, he gave attention to his wound.

The slug had torn a deep and ragged furrow in the muscle of his thigh, but aside from the profuse bleeding it gave Hatfield little concern. Leaning against the tree and fighting the faintness that threatened to envelop him, he gave a shrill whistle.

There was a crashing in the brush below, then Goldy hove into view, snorting questioningly. Hatfield limped to him and from his saddle pouch took a roll of bandage and a pot of antiseptic ointment. With shaking fingers he smeared the wound with the ointment, padded it to staunch the bleeding, and wound a bandage into place. Then he leaned against the tree and rolled a cigarette.

As he drew in deep lungfuls of the satisfying smoke, his nerves steadied. He could see that the flow of blood was lessening. Before he finished the brain tablet the bleeding had stopped altogether. He could hear no sound that would indicate the return of the bearded horseman.

"Don't reckon he'll chance coming back, not judging' by the speed at which he skalleyhooted away from here," he muttered. He limped over to examine the two bodies sprawled on the ground. One was a lean little rat of a man. The other was tall and lanky.

"Ornery-looking scum," the Lone Wolf growled. "Now what in blazes is this all about? One of them yelped, 'That's him,' and at that yell all three went for their hardware. Looks like they knew me, but I can't rec'lect ever seeing any of *them* before. If I ever have seen the sidewinders I sure slipped up for fair, and I'll have it to pay for. At best, I'll be laid up a week with this leg, once it starts to swell.

"Came mighty nigh to paying a full price for my darn foolishness, at that," he decided. "Reckon I'm lucky though. I figure to know Whiskers if I ever see him again."

He figured it all out, morosely.

He squatted painfully beside the dead men and went through their pockets with care. Nothing of any significance was revealed other than a surprisingly large amount of money in gold.

"Well!" he mused, as he replaced the coin. "Looks like the hellions have been having pretty good luck at something!"

He was about to turn away when something peculiar about the black neckerchief worn by the small man caught his eye. It apparently had been slashed with a knife. He fumbled the knot loose, spread out the square of silk—and gave a low whistle.

Two oblong holes had been cut in the handkerchief. A quick examination of the scarf worn by the lanky man revealed

a similar treatment. Hatfield slid the handkerchief up over the dead man's face. The two holes fitted accurately over the glazing eyes.

"Mask" the Ranger exclaimed aloud. "Handkerchiefs cut with eye-holes. A quick flip up and all ready for business. These gents were more than brush popping rustlers, I'd say. Looks like they've been going in for big business. Blazes! I wish I'd downed the other one, too. But maybe it's best I didn't. He'll be a link to the rest of his outfit."

HE STRAIGHTENED up and gave his attention to the horses ridden by the dead men. Well-trained animals. They had not bolted, but were grazing nearby. Hatfield had no trouble approaching them.

"T Fork burn," he muttered. "That's the brand of a spread down in the Brazos country, around Dundee, or I'm a heap mistook. . . . Well, well, this is sort of interesting."

He knew, however, that too much significance could not be attached to the brand. Saddle horses have a habit of being sold again and again, and of getting around. One may often be run upon a long ways from the ranch on which he was foaled. Still, Hatfield considered the incident worthy of remembrance.

"And I'll sure have my eyes skun for gents riding T Fork cayuses," he decided.

He got the rigs off the two animals and turned them loose, confident they could fend for themselves.

Then, with considerable difficulty, he forked Goldy and, with a last glance around, headed back to the trail. His leg was beginning to stiffen and he felt far from good.

It was long past dark when Hatfield, his face lined with pain and fatigue, rode across the old wooden bridge that spanned the Canadian. In Tascosa, he turned east from Bridge Street into Main Street, which was the end of the Dodge Trail. At McCormick's livery stable he found accommodations for his horse. The Exchange Hotel provided a room for himself.

In Jenkins' Saloon and Eating House, the scene of one of the biggest gunfights Tascosa ever saw, he ate a satisfying meal and felt much better. As he smoked an after-supper cigarette he surveyed the activities about him.

"This *pueblo* is a whizzer all right," he decided. "Most anything liable to happen here, and usually does. And I've a notion that right here around the corner of Main and Spring Streets a jigger can get the lowdown on what's going on in the section."

Hatfield was right. Tascosa was considerable of a town. It had numerous saloons, hotels, livery stables, a brass band, a fire department—so-called—a school, two graveyards, a newspaper, hopes for a railroad, and some talk of building a church. It had begun as a blacksmith shop and a general merchandise store, with a saloon soon to follow. A northbound cattle and freight trail crossed the Canadian at the old Tascosa ford and Tascosa grew to be a regular stopping-over place for teamsters and cowhands. Buffalo hunters and other riders of the High Plains swelled the influx of visitors. Saloonkeepers, gamblers, dance-hall girls and legitimate tradespeople welcomed them with open arms.

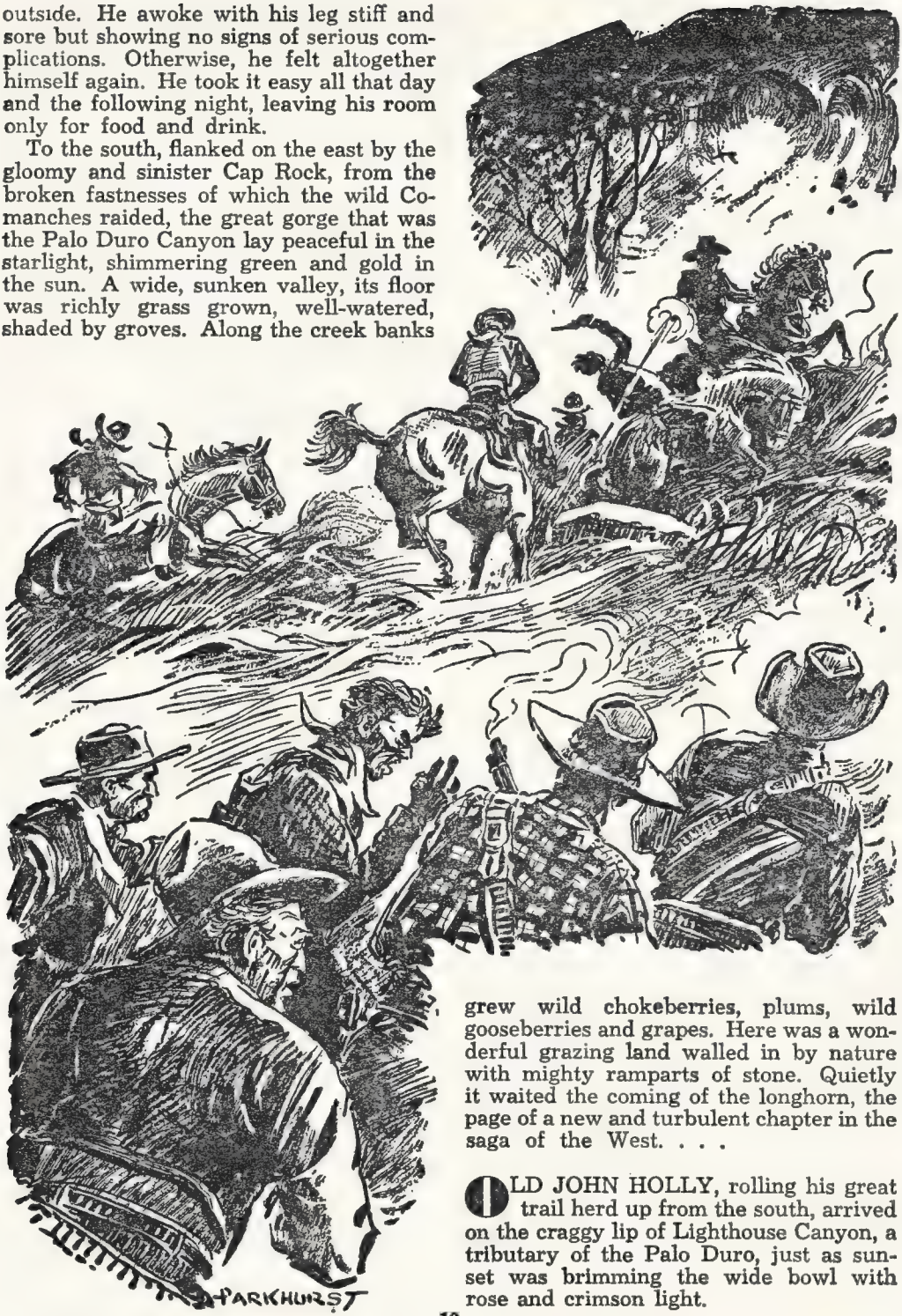
Folks of questionable antecedents and dubious futures found Tascosa a fine squatting ground. A law-and-order clean-up in Mobeetie, a hundred miles to the east, served to swell the disorderly element of the cowtown. A gentleman known as Billy the Kid, with a choice band of followers, raised ructions and shoved a chunk under a corner of perdition, but soon departed for parts unknown. Tascosa on the prod was a mite too salty for even the most notorious killer the Southwest ever knew.

Hatfield chuckled as he listened to the turmoil outside the hotel where he had holed up. A little later he limped up to his room, gave his wound a careful once-over, and decided he could do without a doctor and undue advertising of his injury. Stretched out comfortably on a clean bed, he listened to the bumble of sounds outside that was Tascosa beginning to boil merrily beneath the stars. The cowboy capital of the plains was undoubtedly quite a town. At night it was a hell-kettle of lurid celebration. By day a busy trading post and the hub of the widespread rangeland's activities.

Utterly worn out, Hatfield went to sleep despite the hullabaloo in the street

outside. He awoke with his leg stiff and sore but showing no signs of serious complications. Otherwise, he felt altogether himself again. He took it easy all that day and the following night, leaving his room only for food and drink.

To the south, flanked on the east by the gloomy and sinister Cap Rock, from the broken fastnesses of which the wild Comanches raided, the great gorge that was the Palo Duro Canyon lay peaceful in the starlight, shimmering green and gold in the sun. A wide, sunken valley, its floor was richly grass grown, well-watered, shaded by groves. Along the creek banks



grew wild chokeberries, plums, wild gooseberries and grapes. Here was a wonderful grazing land walled in by nature with mighty ramparts of stone. Quietly it waited the coming of the longhorn, the page of a new and turbulent chapter in the saga of the West. . . .

OLD JOHN HOLLY, rolling his great trail herd up from the south, arrived on the craggy lip of Lighthouse Canyon, a tributary of the Palo Duro, just as sunset was brimming the wide bowl with rose and crimson light.

The Lone Wolf's Colts let go with a rattling crash while a sheet of flame roared upward, making the scene bright as day (CHAP. XV)

Rising from the center of the canyon almost to the level of the plain was a mighty pillar of stone. There were strange markings, sculped by the fingers of the rain and the wind, on the towering column, markings that looked as if carved by the hands of man on this hoary old tombstone to ages long gone.

At its base were springs of water, with nearby groves of gnarled cedars. On all sides flowed the level floor of the gorge until it paused at the foot of the tall cliffs that hemmed the canyon in. Mile on mile of grassland lay within eyesight, the green garment of the plain edged with silver that was the waters of sparkling streams.

Old John's eyes gleamed as he surveyed this fair scene. He turned to his range boss, Cliff Adams.

"Cliff," he said, "this is it. This is what we've been lookin' for ever since we left the Nueces. Here's our new range. Plenty of water, plenty of grass. Plenty of trees for buildin' a fine big ranchhouse and

everything else we need."

"Hard to get down there," Adams observed, spitting contemplatively into the depths beneath his horse's nose.

"There's a way," replied Holly.

He gestured to where a rock slide, worn and weathered, provided a precarious means of descent to the canyon floor.

"Uh-huh," Adams agreed. "We can shove the critters down that, but not the wagons. Too steep and too rough."

"We'll take the wagons apart and lower 'em with ropes," said Holly. "The rest of our gear can go down the same way. I've heard of this section. This canyon runs into the main Palo Duro and you can get out down at the south of the Palo Duro. But I don't believe we'll need to." He spoke contempatively, eyeing the slide. "I've a notion it won't be much of a chore to turn that fall into a purty decent road. And from here it's an easy shoot to the railroad we passed on the way up here, and the shippin' pens."

"You may have somethin' there," Adams agreed. "Well, the cows will be here in another hour and we'd better arrange for a camp. Too late to get down tonight."

He peered into the twilight distance. "Uh-huh, I can see the chuckwagons already. Ought to be water in that grove over there to the left, and there's plenty of good grass hereabouts. Nice beddin' down section."

Holly nodded, gazing westward along the canyon rim. He shaded his eyes with a gnarled hand.

"Here comes somebody," he announced.

CHAPTER IV

The Black Rider

ADAMS instinctively dropped his hands to his gun butt. Strangers in this section were always under suspicion until they proved themselves. However, only a single horseman was approaching. The two cowmen watched as he swiftly drew near.

"Dressed like a Mexican feller," Adams suddenly announced.

"Quite a few of 'em up here, I understand," said Holly. "Fact is, they were about the first to land in this section. Come across from New Mexico with their sheep."

Adams wagged his head disapprovingly. "Sheep and cows together make for trouble," he remarked.

"Not if the sheep is handled right," Holly disagreed. "Remember, there were lots of 'em down in the Nueces country, but the herders kept 'em under control, fenced 'em in and changed pasture often, and there wasn't no trouble."

"That's right," Adams admitted, "but this is open range up here."

"I've a notion it won't be for long," Holly accurately prophesied. "Bob wire has come to Texas, Cliff, and we might as well admit it. That's why that hole down there looks so good to me. We won't have to worry about wire there, or sheep, either, for that matter. It's a natural corral with rock fences already built. Plumb perfect!"

Swiftly the horseman drew nearer. When he was within hailing distance, he waved his hand and raised his voice in a cheery shout. Holly and Adams waved back, and waited.

"Wearin' black velvet and silver conchas all right, but mighty light colored for a Mexican," commented the observant Adams.

"Hidalgo type, I reckon," replied Holly. "All Spanish blood—no *Indio*. Some of them Spaniards are light-colored. I've seed 'em with blue eyes and yaller hair. Come from the north of Spain, I understand. Uh-huh, this feller is plumb white beneath his tan. Big jigger."

A few minutes later the rider reined up beside them. As Holly had already observed, he was a tall man, broad of shoulder, deep of chest, his splendid figure well set off by his black velvet pantaloons and tight-fitting jacket of the same material. He was straight-featured and handsome, with eyes that appeared black at first sight but which closer inspection showed to be darkly blue. His mouth was firm and rather thin-lipped, a straight, tight line above his jutting cleft chin. He had a look of efficiency about him and bestrode his magnificent black horse with the careless grace of a lifetime in the saddle. He appeared to be slightly under middle age.

"Buenos dias!" he greeted smilingly.

"Howdy?" replied Holly.

"Just arrived, eh?" commented the big man in unaccented English. "See you brought along quite a few cows. Figure on squatting hereabouts?"

"That's right," replied Holly.

"Plenty of good land over to the west," the velvet-clad man insinuated. "I have a sheep spread over there. Be glad to have you as neighbors."

"Much obliged," replied Holly, "but we were sort of figurin' to squat down in the canyon. Looks like the makin' of a prime spread down there."

The herder's dark eyes widened. His mode of speech subtly changed and his voice became earnest.

"Senor," he said, "you do not know this section. That ghastly hollow is a land accursed. The ghost of Moro dwells there."

Old John did not appear particlarly impressed.

"Who's Moro?" he asked.

"He was a robber," replied the sheep owner. "He was a man of blood and cruelty who knew no mercy. Moro alive was terrible. His ghost would be something to affright the boldest."

"Never laid much store by ghosts," Holly replied cheerfully. "It's the livin' you have to look out for, feller, not the dead. A dead jigger never harmed anybody."

"You are wrong, *senor,*" the herder returned, with great seriousness. "When the ghost of Moro rides, men die! I pray of you, desist from your purpose. Come with me to the good land to the west. There is plenty for all."

But old John shook his head.

"We'll take our chances," he said with a finality that precluded further argument. "Here come our chuckwagons. We've got to make camp. Stay and take pot luck with us?"

"Gracias, senor," the herder replied, "but I must get back to my *rancherio.* I am Ramon Bera. I hope you will see fit to visit me."

HOLLY supplied his own name and introduced Adams. They shook hands all around. Then Ramon Bera, with a friendly nod, turned his horse and rode back the way he came. Holly watched him go, his look contemplative.

"Now, what's our *amigo* got up his sleeve?" he wondered. "He's almighty anxious for us not to take over in that canyon."

"I don't know," replied Adams, a worried expression on his cadaverous face, "but that palaver of his sort of give me the creeps. Maybe there is such a thing as a ghost, John."

"Bosh!" snorted Holly. "If there's a jigger named Moro ridin' hereabouts, you can count on it he eats regular and sits down solid. Ghosts There ain't no such thing. From what we've been told of this section, we'll have other things 'sides ghosts to worry about. . . . Come on, let's see if we can make camp in that grove. Tomorrow, soon as it's light, we'll head down that slide."

Camp was made in the grove. The cook quickly threw together a satisfying evening meal. The herd was bedded down for the night. Soon the tired Tumbling H punchers were all asleep.

That is, all but the night hawks to whom were assigned the chore of guarding the great herd—and Cliff Adams. The night hawks were forced to stay awake. The range boss couldn't sleep. The conversation with the sheep owner had disturbed Adams and left him in a nervous frame of mind.

After hours of fruitless twisting and turning, he swore wearily, threw aside his blankets and slipped on his boots. He rolled a cigarette and smoked for a while. Then, with a disgusted grunt, he pinched out the butt, rose to his feet and walked to the canyon's rim, carefully making his way through the grove so as to skirt the herd and not disturb the contentedly rumbling cattle.

For long minutes he stood gazing into the moon-silvered depths. The groves and the clumps of thicket were black and motionless as if carved from ebony. The glint of moving water showed here and there, but no sound of its progress was to be heard. Down there was a dead world where nothing moved. The vast bulk of the lighthouse soared upward, its lofty crest rimmed about with wan fire, its mighty spire clothed in shadows.

Adams was about to turn back to seek his delayed rest when his keen eyes caught a flicker of movement at the edge of a grove some distance up the canyon.

As he gazed, something took shape from the shadows. Quickly it resolved into a speeding horse and rider. Adams muttered under his breath and peered with outthrust neck.

Swiftly the lone horseman drew nearer. Another moment and Adams could make out that he was a tall man swathed in what appeared to be a long black cloak. He flashed by directly beneath where Adams stood and continued on down the canyon toward where it opened into the main gorge of the Palo Duro.

Silently as a shade among the shades he passed. No click of hoofs, no jingle of bridle irons or popping of saddle leather rose to the tense watcher on the canyon rim. Ghostly, unreal, horse and rider passed on to vanish into the black shadow the towering Lighthouse threw across the canyon floor. Adams watched intently, but the horseman did not reappear beyond the belt of shadow.

"Now where in blazes did he go?" muttered the Tumbling H range boss.

He continued to peer for some minutes, but the canyon depths lay silent and deserted. Adams felt the palms of his hands grow clammy with a cold moisture. He waited another moment, wetting his dry lips with a nervous tongue. Then he turned and hurried back to the grove, with many a frightened backward glance over his shoulder.

"Maybe that herder was right," he breathed. "Ghosts! I wish I'd never seen that blasted hole. . . ."

JIM HATFIELD was optimistic when he estimated he would be laid up a week as a result of his brush with the mask-packing drygulchers. Nearer a fortnight elapsed before he felt able to risk throwing his wounded leg over Goldy's back.

In the course of his forced stay in Tascosa, Hatfield quickly became convinced that a bunch with more than ordinary brains and ability was undoubtedly operating in the section. Hardly a day passed but some story of outrage came to town. The sheriff had stationed two deputies in Tascosa, but they appeared powerless to halt the depredations.

"Everybody's gettin' jumpy," a loquacious barkeep confided to Hatfield. "All you hear is the Black Riders. Call 'em that because they wear black masks. Night before last old Tom Brundage had a big herd run off. Four days ago the Vega stage was held up. The XT fellers swear they're losin' cows steady. The sidewinders don't stop at nothin'! Ramon Bera even had a flock of sheep lifted!"

"Sheep in this section, then?" Hatfield remarked by way of making conversation.

"Uh-huh, lots of them," replied the drink juggler. "Always have been, I reckon. They were here when the cows come. Bera has a big ranch just west of the Palo Duro Canyon. He fences his range and handles his sheep well. Stands in good with the cowmen. Everybody likes him. . . . 'Scuse me 'fore them empty jugs down there bust the bar with their hammerin'."

He hurried off to attend to the wants of the thirsty and impatient customers. Hatfield smoked thoughtfully until he returned, some minutes later.

"As I was sayin'," the barkeep resumed where he had left off, then suddenly stopped. "Why, here comes Ramon Bera now!"

A tall, unusually handsome man dressed in black velvet had just entered the saloon and was making his way to a place farther down the bar. The bartender turned back to Hatfield.

"Pete will take care of him," he said, seeing his assistant reach for a bottle. "Bera is all right, even though he is a Mexican. Understand he's lived all his life in Texas, though—down in the Nueces country. Come up here nearly three years back and bought his holdin's from the Cartinas family. He's a nice feller."

At that instant the swinging doors banged open to admit a new customer accompanied by three companions.

"And there's somebody what ain't nice!" growled the barkeep, his brows wrinkling under his spit curl. "That big hellion is Bull Lawson, and them's three of his ruckus-raisin' Bradded L hands with him. They'll start somethin' before they leave. See if they don't!"

Hatfield was forced to admit that Lawson was not a particularly prepossessing person—at first sight, anyhow. He was short but powerfully built, with the chest and shoulders of a giant. His hair was carroty and bristly. He had an underslung jaw, a big mouth, a prominent nose

with a sideward slant to it, and truculent blue eyes. He walked with a swagger, heaving his shoulders and swinging his arms.

When he clattered into a chair at a nearby table and bellowed for drinks, it was easy to understand how he had come by his nickname. His voice shook the rafters.

His companions were long, lean, dangerous-looking men in cowland garb. All four wore guns, and a knife handle protruded from the top of Lawson's boots.

"A salty bunch, all right," Hatfield told himself.

The barkeep leaned close. "There are folks that say," he began confidentially, then abruptly shut up. "But I reckon I ain't got no business passin' around gossip," he muttered, and hurried off to the other end of the bar.

Hatfield wondered how much his sudden change of mind was due to qualms of conscience and how much to the glance Lawson had shot toward the bar. He watched the Bradded L bunch curiously.

THE three Bradded L cowboys said little and spoke in low tones. But their boss made up for them. He never stopped talking, and his voice carried to all parts of the room.

He downed three drinks in quick succession, wolfed a sandwich, and then glared about.

Suddenly he rose to his feet and lumbered over to a poker table where there was a vacant chair. Without invitation he dropped into it.

"This game's goin' to pick up," he announced in stentorian tones. "I'm settin' down poor but I aims to rise up rich. Deal me a hand!"

"I knowed it!" moaned the bartender at Hatfield's elbow. "That big hellion loves to play poker, and almost always any game he sets in ends up in a row. Just you watch! This is pay-day and the stakes are big. Things are goin' to happen."

He waved a hand at a man who was passing by.

"Good night, Don Ramon," he called.

The tall, handsome sheep rancher, Ramon Bera, nodded in friendly fashion and passed through the swinging doors. The barkeep, between serving drinks, kept his attention on the poker game.

CHAPTER V

Lone Wolf Alone

LESS than ten minutes had passed when the drink juggler proved himself a true prophet. Bull Lawson suddenly leaped to his feet with a roar and swung a ponderous fist across the table at the dealer. The dealer jerked back, got his chair off balance. He took the table with him when he landed on the floor, chair and all, with a crash. He came up spitting curses and flailing at Lawson with a leg of the smashed chair.

The three Bradded L punchers leaped to the aid of their boss. Instantly the vicinity was a tangle of flying fists, splintering chairs and breaking glasses. A bottle whacked a Bradded L puncher over the head. He jerked his gun, but a companion knocked it up and he sent three shots roaring through the ceiling before the six was wrested from his hand.

Others had joined in by this time. Half the room was a wreck. The walls bulged, the shingles ground together, the hanging lamps danced and flickered. Yells, shouts, the thud of boots and the crash of smashing furniture swelled in an uproar that could be heard a mile.

Jim Hatfield, not at all sure as to just who was in the right and who was in the wrong, remained a passive but interested spectator.

Floor men, waiters, lookouts and dealers hurled themselves into the fray and forced the combatants apart by sheer weight of numbers. Nobody was seriously hurt, but there were swelling eyes and bloody noses a-plenty.

"You blasted locoed no-good!" Bull Lawson roared at the dealer. "I told you not to deal that card yet!"

"You locoed jughead!" the dealer howled back. "Everybody had their bets placed and you know it!"

"Cuss you, I wanted to raise, and you know it!" Lawson bellowed in reply.

"Shut up, all of you!" squalled the proprietor of the saloon, a prodigiously fat man with a high, piping, but absurdly penetrating voice. "Who's gonna pay for

them busted chairs?"

"Try and collect from *me!*" thundered Lawson, waving both fists in the air.

"I lost seven bucks' worth of chips!" shrieked another player. "Who's goin' to make good?"

The hullabaloo started all over.

Men were crowding through the swinging doors and peering in the windows as the other saloons along the street emptied to investigate the row. Rows were common enough in Tascosa, but not such a row as was kicked up that night in Jenkins' place. The outsiders added their voices to the pandemonium.

But suddenly the noise stilled. From the street sounded a stutter of shots, a wild yelling, and a clashing of fast hoofs drumming toward Bridge Street. Then more shots and more yelling. The crowd boiled out of Jenkins' place to see what new was up.

A man was staggering across Main Street. Blood streamed down his face from a gashed scalp. He waved a smoking gun.

"Stop 'em!" he screeched. "Hold 'em! Get 'em!"

"It's Billings of the Cattle Exchange Saloon!" somebody whooped. "What's the matter, Bill? Who you want stopped?"

"The robbers!" yelped Billings. "Them cursed Black Riders. They cleaned me out!"

Pandemonium broke loose again.

Jim Hatfield pushed his way through the babble and took the half-dazed Billings by the arm.

"Steady, feller," he said quietly. "Let's have a look at that head of yours. It's more important than the money you lost."

HE PROBED the wound with deft fingers, peered closely into Billings' eyes and decided there was neither fracture nor concussion. Taking a clean handkerchief from his pocket, he bound up the wound.

"Now tell us what happened," he said.

Under the Lone Wolf's ministrations, Billings grew calmer.

"When the row busted loose over here, everybody run out," he said. "That is, everybody but three jiggers settin' at a corner table with their hats pulled down low. All of a sudden they jerked black masks up over their faces and I found myself lookin' into three gun muzzles. They cleaned the till and the safe—it was standin' open!"

"Much in it?" asked Hatfield.

"More'n three thousand dollars! The boys all deposit with me on pay-day, and a couple of the stores bring in the day's take when it gets dark. The holdups got it, then they belted me over the head with a gun-barrel and walked out. I got a hard head, so I wasn't plumb knocked out. I grabbed a gun and ran after them. They were just forkin' their horses. I blazed away at 'em but I don't figure I hit anybody. Couldn't see very well and my hand was shakin'. They skalleyhooted for the bridge, I figure."

"Get a good look at them?" Hatfield asked.

Billings shook his bandaged head. "I just noticed 'em settin' there drinkin'—didn't pay much attention to 'em," he replied. "Two of 'em was sort of tall. The other one was short and had whiskers. That's about all I noticed."

Hatfield nodded, his black brows drawing together.

"Here comes the deputy!" somebody shouted. "Make room for the deputy."

Hatfield, having learned all he could, stepped back to make way for the deputy sheriff who came hurrying up and took charge of the situation.

The Ranger returned to Jenkins' saloon, his eyes thoughtful. Swampers were straightening things up and packing out the wreckage.

"What a night!" moaned the talkative bartender, mopping his brow and rearranging his spit curl. "And it ain't half over yet."

Hatfield suddenly shot a question at him.

"What were you going to say about Bull Lawson a little while back?" he asked.

The barkeep started. His lips tightened. But something in Hatfield's steady eyes caused them to open again.

"I was just goin' to say that there are folks who 'low Lawson and his bunch might be the Black Riders," he said slowly.

"You're right about not passing such talk along, if you don't know it's true," Hatfield told him grimly. "Say, does anybody have any notion where the Black Riders hang out?"

"Some folks figure New Mexico, but more opine their hole-up is somewhere down in the Palo Duro," the drink juggler

told him. "Hard to tell. There's plenty of places to hide in hereabouts."

Hatfield nodded, and did not pursue the conversation further.

The crowd began drifting back in, excitedly discussing the hold-up. The row in the saloon was forgotten.

Hatfield watched attentively for half an hour and more, but Bull Lawson and his hands did not put in an appearance. Finally Hatfield left and began a systematic round of the various places in town. His interest increased as nowhere in his survey did he encounter Lawson and his bunch. It began to look as if the Bradded L outfit had either left town or gone into seclusion.

Hatfield wondered why. To all appearances, Lawson and his hands had come to town to make a pay-day of it. Certainly the shindig in Jenkins' place, Hatfield reasoned, would not have caused them to pull out. Such a ruckus would be taken in stride by as turbulent an outfit as the Bradded L. And the row in Jenkins' place had certainly worked in mighty well with the plans of the owlhoots who had robbed the Exchange.

Finally Hatfield retraced his steps along Main until he reached Bridge Street. After a moment's hesitation he turned south. He passed First Street and approached a section of the town that had a decidedly unsavory reputation. South of Second Street corresponded to south of the railroad in Dodge City.

In the business and residential sections of Tascosa, the peace officers strove to keep something like order. But south of Second was left largely to its own devices, with the law seldom interfering. Second Street was like what old-timers called the Pecos River—"the deadline for sheriffs."

SO AS he approached Second, Hatfield was on the alert. He dropped into a couple of places that boasted anything but a wholesome atmosphere. As he left the second of these, he glanced carefully around. A moment later, his caution was redoubled.

Gliding along on the far side of the street and some distance to the rear were four men. When Hatfield quickened his pace, they quickened theirs. When he slowed down, the shadowy quartette also slowed down.

"Tailing me, sure as blazes," he decided.

He began to take careful note of his surroundings. Four to one made for odds a mite too strong for even the Lone Wolf, the environment and circumstances taken into consideration.

He passed the corner of Second and Main, and no great distance ahead were the lumber yards and the bridge across the Canadian.

Squatting on the edge of the sharp drop to the river, and a little above high-water mark was a squalid little saloon, with but a faint glow of light seeping through its dirty window panes. Hatfield took careful note of the structure and its surroundings as he drew near. He saw that the rear of the building was supported by stout piling some seven or eight feet in height. Underneath the projecting floor was blackest darkness.

Hatfield studied the shadowy reaches

[*Turn page*]

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between where he stood and the bridge head, which was less than a dozen yards distant. And as he did, he was certain he sensed movement where the bridge head rested on a squat supporting pier.

"Surrounded!" he muttered. "This is going to take some thinking out."

His mind working at racing speed, he turned boldly into the saloon, pushing open the swinging doors and pausing an instant. He shot a swift glance around the room and sized up the surroundings.

The room was not large, with a bar spanning its length to the right of the entrance. To the left was a cleared space, then several tables. One, Hatfield noted, was close to a window in the wall opposite the bar. The room was lighted by a single large hanging lamp suspended from the center of the ceiling. The smoky chimney seemed to send forth about as much of shadow as of light.

Only one table was occupied, but a straggle of men lined the bar. Hatfield caught the glint of sideward glances as he entered, and there was a sudden stilling of the low babble of talk. It began again almost instantly, however, as the bartender, a beetlebrowed individual with an underslung jaw and a crooked nose, mumbled something that Hatfield could not catch. He shot a sullen, shifty glance at the Lone Wolf and reached for a bottle

But Hatfield did not pause at the bar. He sauntered carelessly to the table beside the window and sat down. A frowsy waiter wearing a dirty apron slouched up. He grunted as he took Hatfield's order, and slouched to the bar to return with a bottle and a glass. Hatfield paid for the bottle and poured himself a drink. He sipped it unconcernedly. Apparently he took no heed when the doors swung apart to admit four men who walked to the bar without a glance in his direction.

"Here comes the showdown," he told himself. "Wonder how they figure to work it?"

The four ordered drinks and appeared to engage the villainous-looking bartender in conversation. The drink juggler nodded his uncombed head, which turned slowly right and left. Hatfield could see the corner of his mouth move but could not catch what was said.

Quickly, however, he understood the meaning of what was said, although he did not hear it.

Men on either side of the new arrivals began slowly to edge away from them. Hatfield watched their backs and poured another drink. The first he had managed to spill on the floor. The four men in whom he was interested made no move.

"Waiting for me to stand up and start for the door," he decided. "Will wait till the full light from the lamp catches me. . . . Uh-huh, I thought so. They're turning sideward. Smart bunch of jiggers, all right. But maybe just a mite too smart for their own good."

The men, all of them about medium height with no outstanding characteristics Hatfield could note, had their hat brims pulled low. In the dimly lighted room their features were little more than shapeless blurs.

Hatfield tasted the second drink, decided there was nothing wrong with it, and sipped it slowly. He saw that there was now an open space on either side of the four men he watched. All the other patrons had deftly dropped out of line.

His face bleak as chiseled granite, his eyes coldly gray, the Lone Wolf stood up, shoving his empty glass aside with a clatter, pushing his chair well back. The four men instantly turned to face him.

CHAPTER VI

Gentlemen, Hush

HATFIELD took a step forward, saw the hands of the four men who had stalked him drop downward. With the speed of light he acted. His bronzed hands streaked to his holsters and in the same movement he hurled himself sideward and down.

Caught off-balance by the utter unexpectedness of the move, the four killers were just a mite slow. Before a single gun of theirs cleared leather, both of Hatfield's Colts let go with a rattling crash. One muzzle was tipped up, the other spurted flame and smoke across the room.

The lamp chimney flew into a thousand fragments. Black darkness instantly blan-

keted the room. From the direction of the bar sounded a howl of pain. Then guns roared in unison and bullets slashed and shredded the floor where Hatfield was supposed to be lying.

But by a miracle of agility, the Lone Wolf had straightened his long body before he hit the floor. He went backward two flickering steps. He seized the chair beside the table and sent it crashing through the window.

"There he goes!" a voice bellowed. "He's gone through the window. Get him!"

Red flashes spurted through the darkness. Shots boomed. Boots pounded the floor.

Hatfield was meanwhile racing around the wall. He alone amid the milling, cursing, shooting mob knew just what he was doing and just where he was going. He flickered along the bar while the crowd was charging the window and darted out the door. He swerved around the corner of the building, gripped one of the supporting piles and swung down into the black void beneath the rear of the shack.

Overhead was a perfect inferno of wrathful action. An instant later Hatfield heard boots on the sidewalk outside.

"He can't get away!" somebody bawled. "He ain't gone far."

Hatfield groped about until his hand encountered a sizable boulder. With all his strength he hurled it toward the bridge head. It landed on the floor boards and went bounding along the planks, making a prodigious clatter.

"There he goes!" roared a voice. "He's crossin' the bridge! After him!"

Shadows flickered past Hatfield's hiding place. It seemed to him that every man who had been in the room above was charging the bridgehead. Their feet pounded the planks. Shots crashed in a veritable volley.

Hatfield glided across to the far corner of the building. He swarmed up a piling and peeped cautiously over the lip of the bank.

Standing at the corner by the sidewalk was a man who peered this way and that. Hatfield eased himself over the lip of the bank and stood up in the shadow of the building.

With slow, cautious steps he moved forward, pausing as the watcher turned his head from side to side. Another step, and another. He clubbed his gun and took a long stride.

The man whirled as Hatfield's boot clicked on a stone. Hatfield lashed out with his Colt. The barrel crunched on bone and the man went down with a choking gasp. Hatfield leaped over his body and raced up Bridge Street. Behind sounded wrathful bellows and a few shots. But there was no pursuit. He reached Main Street and slowed down, breathing easily. He turned the corner and headed east, chuckling under his breath.

"A good try," he told himself, "but it didn't quite work. Well, somebody is sure keeping tabs on me." He added as an afterthought, "And I never did see hide or hair of Bull Lawson and his bunch. Oh, well, it was a lively shindig, and maybe the exercise did my leg good."

HE REACHED his room without further incident.

"What I'd still like to know most of all is," he mused as he cleaned his guns, "was that shindig in Jenkins' place deliberately put on? It looked real enough, and Lawson has a reputation for that sort of thing, but it sure did come mighty pat. Gave those hellions the opportunity they'd likely been looking for all evening. Everybody knows that the cowhands leave part of their *dinero* with Billings as soon as they hit town on pay-day, and that the storekeepers use his big safe as a depository. And the Exchange does the biggest business of any bar in town." He polished furiously for a moment as he thought. "Um," was his decision, "Billings lost plenty tonight. It was a good haul. But just where does Lawson fit into the picture? Is he just a trouble-making rancher? Or is there considerable more to him than shows on the surface? That barkeep seems to think so. But a feller of Lawson's temperament don't have much trouble getting himself a bad reputation. He's likely made enemies aplenty. That's enough to start folks talking. Besides, everybody in this neck of the woods is jumpy—and with cause. Whoever is back of the bunch operating hereabouts has plenty of savvy. The chore they pulled tonight shows that. Brains and patience, and cold nerve. And that's a combination that makes for trouble."

He pondered the bartender's surmise as to the possible stamping grounds of the

bunch. He knew that the main Palo Duro Canyon was a wide, grass-grown valley admirably adapted to cattle raising. But there was also a web of side canyons and gorges, some of them communicating with the corresponding canyon system of the Canadian Valley. A regular hole-in-the-wall for fair. And as admirably adapted for cattle rustling.

"Hunting for a jigger in that tangle is like trying to root out a particular dog in a prairie dog town," he growled. "But that sort, sooner or later, makes a slip." He thought that over. "Perhaps they made one tonight. If there was any connection between the robbery and the row in Jennings' place, they sure did."

He thought over the New Mexico angle then, a possible hideout across the line, but was inclined to discount the theory. Then, with the unerring acumen of the trained Ranger, he put his finger on the weak link.

"They've got to have a market for the cows they lift," he was firmly convinced. "And the only possible market is in New Mexico! How do they get them there?"

The Ranger had already learned that the northern routes to New Mexico were carefully guarded by special deputies and volunteers from the various spreads. Little attention, however, was given to the southern routes, for that was where the old buffalo and the Indian had vanished into a pitiless desert country, a region bewildering to the brain, choking to the throat, where lips parched and tongues swelled. Low sand hills, absolutely barren of vegetation, waterless, white as snow, extended for miles. Altogether too many miles for a fast traveling herd to cross without water.

"But the Indians used to make it across, somehow," came pressingly to Hatfield's mind. "And old buffalo trails lead to the edge of the desert. I'd be willing to bet they didn't end there, though. Buffalo don't go ambling along and then stop all of a sudden for no good reason.

NEXT ISSUE

CAPTAIN BOB, the IMMORTAL

An Exciting True Texas Rangers Story

By HAROLD PREECE

OF COURSE there are no signs of the trails on the desert, for the drifting sand filled them up long ago.

"The one thing anybody can be sure of is that the buffalo had a plumb definite reason for crossing the desert—new feeding grounds at the foot of the mountains. But they would never have started out to make such a trip without instinctively knowing there was water along the way. There *must* be water out there somewhere, and if there is, the drive across wouldn't be impossible. But there'd be no finding the route, except by sheer accident, unless a jigger had something to go on. Trail a herd of lifted critters from hereabouts, and it could be done, maybe."

But here again was a complication. Trailing across the Panhandle grass lands was about as difficult as trailing across the eternally shifting sands of the desert. Hatfield recalled a passage he once read in an old book dealing with this same region, an excerpt from the diary of Pedro de Castanada, scrivener to the great Spanish explorer, Francisco Vasquez Coronado, who wandered over the Panhandle in his ill-fated search for the Seven Cities of Cibola.

"Who would believe that a thousand horses, five hundred cows, more than five thousand rams and ewes, and more than fifteen hundred friendly Indians and servants, in traveling over these plains, would leave no more trace where they had passed than if nothing had been there. The grass never failed to spring up after it had been trodden down. Indeed, it was necessary to pile up bones now and then so the rear guard could follow the army."

And Hatfield knew well that the country had not changed since Coronado traversed it, hundreds of years before. If the passage of an army left no trace, what could be expected of a fleeing herd of widelooped cows!

With a disgusted grunt, the Lone Wolf stood up, stretched his long arms above his head and prepared to lie down in more comfort and go to sleep. His wound was more tender, but he considered he was about recovered enough to ride again.

"So day after tomorrow, I'll just take a little sashay over to the Palo Duro country and see what I can see," he decided as he blew out the light, preparatory for his needed rest.

CHAPTER VII

A "Dear"

IT WAS close to mid-morning, two days later, when Hatfield left Tascosa. He rode at an easy pace in deference to his healing leg. He was in no hurry, for he had no definite destination in view.

His saddle pouches were well-stocked with staple provisions and one or two simple cooking utensils. He anticipated camping out for a few nights if necessary. His object was to explore the Palo Duro terrain on the chance of picking up some clew as to the hangout of the mysterious Black Riders.

At first glance, his task appeared to verge on the hopeless. The maze of canyons and gorges was vast and little known. Whole tribes of Indians had lived in the Palo Duro, and great herds of buffalo. One side canyon had provided grazing ground for fifty thousand wild mustangs. The ground was wild and broken, much of it heavily wooded.

But Hatfield's experience told him that such owlhoot bands as the one whose depredations had been plaguing this country usually followed a definite pattern of procedure. Though they might have as many earths as a coyote, they usually followed fixed routes to their hole-ups and seldom diverged from them. Let him discover but a single trail and he was confident he could follow it to his objective.

Meanwhile, he could do little more than scout the ground and hope for a break.

For some miles Hatfield followed the south bank of the Canadian. The river was fringed with bushes and willows and the ground was bright with flowers. Beavers had built dams across the creeks and in some places had changed the course of streams. Bird life was plentiful. Hatfield twice saw antelopes and once a deer. He watched wild turkeys strutting about in a clearing with two attentive coyotes squatting in the bushes in the hope of corralling a drumstick or two. There was an abundance of wild fruit and the meadows were richly grass grown.

"Would seem folks with such a really beautiful country to live in would be content and not go stirring up trouble for each other," he mused.

Then he chuckled as the coyotes made a sudden dash into the open and dived back into the bushes almost instantly, one gripping a squawking hen turkey in its jaws.

"But somebody's always wanting something they haven't got," he finished his thought, as he rode on.

Shortly afterward he veered to the southeast, leaving the river and its main valley. Soon he was threading a region much cut up by arroyos and gulches that gradually assumed the proportions of canyons. The growth was thicker and the going not at all easy. He understood now why Tascosa had come into existence. At the site of the town was about the only easy approach to the Canadian.

As he rode, Hatfield constantly scanned the surrounding terrain, with frequent inspections of his back-track. He had purposely left town in broad daylight, hoping that some enterprising gent of the same brand as those he had encountered on the trail from Amarillo might tail along after him. If such an hombre could be captured, he might be persuaded to talk enough and divulge some valuable information.

But as the hours passed, the Ranger saw nothing of life that did not boast fur or feathers. Along toward evening he halted in a little brush-walled clearing on a creek bank, intending to cook a meal.

Plenty of wood was available and soon coffee was steaming in a little flat bucket and bacon was sizzling and crackling in a small skillet. Hatfield set the bacon aside on a tin plate and proceeded to manufacture a dough cake which he dropped into the bacon grease.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed the merest trifle. He bent over the skillet, deftly turning the cake and chuckling aloud as though in remembrance of some humorous occurrence. Without the slightest premonitory warning, he went sideward in a catlike leap, whirling around in the same movement, his hands flashing down and up.

WHEN he stood rigid, his thumbs hooked over the cocked hammers of his big Colts, staring at the visitor whose approach had been heralded by an

almost inaudible rustling in the growth that walled the clearing on three sides.

Slowly Hatfield lowered the hammers and dropped the sixes back into their sheaths. His visitor was a girl.

A girl with great startled blue eyes, a profusion of short, curly brown hair, and a piquant little red-lipped face with a slightly tip-tilted nose with a few golden freckles on its straight bridge. She was slender and trim in her rangeland riding clothes, with decidedly nice curves where curves were in order.

"Howdy, ma'am?" Hatfield greeted. "Excuse me for throwing down on you, but I thought you were—a deer."

"I'm mighty glad I'm not," the girl declared emphatically, her gaze on the black butts protruding from their cut-out holsters.

Hatfield's teeth flashed in a smile. "Come to think of it, I've a notion you are," he replied. "All depends on how you spell it."

The girl stared at him, Then the implication sank in and she blushed rosily, and hastened to change the subject.

"I smelled your bacon," she said.

"Hungry?" Hatfield asked.

"Starved!"

"Well, then, come on and eat," the Lone Wolf invited. "Plenty for us both."

"Thanks, I will," the girl accepted. "I'll get my pony first."

She turned back toward the growth, and halted, her eyes on the great sorrel grazing nearby.

"Oh, what a beautiful horse!" she exclaimed. "What's his name?"

"Goldy," Hatfield replied, and, as an afterthought, supplied his own.

"Mine is Doris Holly," the girl offered in return, a dimple showing at the corner of her red lips. "I'm very glad to know you, Mr. Hatfield, and very glad you didn't shoot me."

"I'm glad, too," Hatfield declared with such earnestness that she colored again and quickly slipped into the growth.

She returned a moment later, leading a chunky little bay. She deftly removed the bit before Hatfield could move to help her, and came back to the fire.

"Sorry, there are no cups," Hatfield said when, in a few moments more, they sat with the bacon and the crisply browned dough cake between them. "We'll have to take turns drinking from the bucket."

"I don't mind," the girl reassured him. "I'm used to roughing it. I lived all the way up here from the Nueces country in a chuckwagon. I think it's fun."

"What are you doing riding out here in the brush?" Hatfield asked.

"Just riding," she replied. "I rode up from our ranchhouse. It's to the southeast of here, in a canyon."

"In a canyon?"

"Yes, a wide, beautiful canyon with a great pillar of rock standing in the middle of it."

"Lighthouse Canyon," Hatfield said, recognizing the description. "I rode past it a few years back. Don't recall seeing a spread there, though."

"There wasn't any then," the girl told him. "We came up from the Nueces country only last month and settled there. Dad was tired of so much heat and droughts, and the range is getting crowded down there, too, so he pulled up stakes and headed north. When he saw that canyon he decided that was just the place for us. We just finished our ranchhouse a week ago. I like it up here."

"It's a nice country," Hatfield agreed. "Good grass and still plenty of room."

"Do you ride for a spread hereabouts?" Doris asked.

"Nope," Hatfield evaded. "Just sort of chuckline riding, right now."

"Then you're headed for nowhere in particular?"

"Reckon that's so."

"Then why not ride back to the spread with me and spend the night with us?" she invited. "I've an idea Dad would like to talk with you, seeing you know the country. Wouldn't be surprised if he'd offer you a job of riding, if you're interested."

SOUNDS like a good notion," Hatfield agreed.

In fact, the idea worked in well with his plans. If he could tie in with a spread, it would give him an excuse for hanging around the canyon country for a spell.

"I'll clean up and wash the dishes," Doris offered quickly. "That's woman work. You get the horses ready."

"Looks like I'm getting a lucky break," Hatfield said, with a smile. "You wouldn't

be bad to have along all the time."

"Not so good," she replied, with a toss of her curly head. "You'd have to feed me, and I eat plenty."

"Not so much, I reckon," Hatfield differed. "You're not bigger than a minute."

Doris straightened her trim figure.

"I'll have you know you are a very tall man, sir," she replied. "That's why I seem so small to you. I'm well over five feet. Now hurry and get the horses ready. I'll be finished before you are."

Hatfield chuckled to himself as he tightened the cinches. "Sort of used to giving orders, huh? Well, she'd make a sort of nice range boss, at that."

For an hour they threaded their way through the growth and then emerged upon the limitless grasslands. The sun lay low in the west on a purple cloud and cast a flood of amber light across the prairie. The level rays glittered on the browning leaves of the chaparral, turning them to flakes of dead gold the brighter for the dark depths behind.

Overhead the sky was deepest blue with a promise of gold and scarlet to come as the sun sank lower. A little wind stirred the grass heads and rippled them in endless waves that rolled on and on to the thin, fine line of the horizon. The hush of early autumn was in the air and the musical hum of bees was taking on a drowsy note in anticipation of the long winter sleep.

The beauty of the scene charmed both to silence, and for some time they rode steadily without speaking.

"A little more to the east," Doris Holly said at length. "It will be dark before we reach the spread, but it doesn't matter. There's a moon tonight and there's nothing in the way."

The sun sank in flame and splendor behind the hills to the west. The sky became a riot of color that slowly faded to steely gray, darkened to purple-blue. The stars came out one by one to hang like grapes of light in the immensities of the heavens.

For a while the prairie was shadowy, but not for long. The east brightened. A huge and ruddy full moon shouldered its way up through the grasses, paled as it climbed higher, and flooded the prairie with silvery light.

Hatfield instintively reined in a litttle closer to his charming companion. She glanced up at him and laughed gaily.

"That moon does things to you, doesn't it?" she remarked.

"Yes, ma'am, it does," Hatfield agreed soberly. "How much farther we got to go?"

"Oh, we should reach the canyon rim above the ranchouse in another twenty minutes," she replied. She laughed again, and shot him another glance through the silken fringe of her lashes.

And this time it was the usually self-assured Lone Wolf who colored beneath his tan.

Another ten minutes of steady riding and Hatfield uttered a surprised exclamation.

"Look at that glow building up against the sky ahead," he remarked. "Looks almost like something burning."

"Maybe Dad has lit a bonfire of the shavings and things left from the building," Doris hazarded. "He'll be glad to see us. I've an idea he may be getting lonesome. He's all alone there now, because the boys ran a small herd to the railroad yesterday. They'd been working hard since we got here, with no time for play, and Dad let them all go along and told them to stay over tonight in town and have some fun."

Hatfield nodded, but his black brows drew together and he quickened Goldy's pace. That steadily increasing glow appeared a little too large for one cast by a refuse burning.

CHAPTER VIII

Blood of the Snake

FIVE minutes later when they dashed up to the canyon rim, the glow was a fiery red and flickering. Doris uttered a frightened cry.

"It's the ranchhouse! It's on fire!"

Hatfield had already arrived at that conclusion.

Beneath them was the broad expanse of Lighthouse Canyon, lit by the flames of a briskly burning building. The whole lower portion of the structure was blaz-

ing, with flames shooting out the windows. Smoke billowed from the upper windows and streamed along the shingles of the roof. So far as Hatfield could see, there was nobody in sight.

"This way!" screamed Doris, veering her horse. "Here's the road down, over here!"

The "road" was still little more than the rock slide it had been when old John Holly and his men had first viewed it, but they went down it as if it were a broad and level causeway. By a miracle, or thanks to the agility of their horses, they reached the canyon floor without broken necks, and raced toward the burning building.

"Dad!" Doris screamed again in an agony of apprehension. "Where are you?"

There was no answer save the crackling of the flames. Hatfield swept the terrain with his eyes, centered his gaze on the burning building. Doris suddenly shrieked in terror.

"There he is!" she cried. "At the upper window!"

A face had appeared at the smoke-billowing window, the face of a grizzled elderly man with a drooping mustache. He seemed to be attempting to clamber over the sill, but just as Hatfield opened his lips to roar to him to wait, he fell back and disappeared from view.

Hatfield left his saddle in a streaking leap and seized the girl, who had dismounted and was running toward the burning building.

"Let me go!" she screamed, beating at his breast with her small fists. "Let me go. He'll be burned alive!"

Hatfield shook her till her curls tossed wildly and her teeth clicked together.

"Stop it!" he barked. "You can't go in there. The whole lower story is a mass of flames. Stop it, and help me. The smoke got him. We've got to get him out through the window somehow."

Still holding the sobbing girl, who was nevertheless getting a grip on herself, he glanced about. Some thirty feet from the burning house grew a single tall tree, but the branches did not reach to the window. He measured the distance from the stout trunk to the window with his eye. He loosed the girl.

"A pitchfork," he said, "or a long-handled spade! Anything with a good strong handle. Where can I find one?"

"There are tools in the barn," she gasped. "I'll show you."

They raced to the barn which stood some little distance from the ranchhouse, and jerked open the door.

"In this corner," panted the girl.

Hatfield groped about in the darkness. His hand encountered a smooth wooden shaft. He jerked it out. It proved to be a heavy spade with a stout oaken handle.

"This will do," he told her hurriedly. "Let's go!"

They sped back to the horses. Hatfield flipped loose his sixty-foot rope. Working at top speed, he tied the rope to the spade handle near the middle, so it would balance. He ran as close to the burning building as the heat would allow.

"If I hit him with this thing I'll skewer him to the floor," he muttered as he drew back his arm. "But he's a goner, anyhow, if something isn't done pronto."

As a javelin thrower casts his spear, he hurled the spade at the window opening.

Straight and true it sped. Hatfield heard it clatter on the floor. He hauled on the rope. As he anticipated, the tool lipped the window ledge with either end held securely against the jambs. Sliding the rope through his hands he raced to the tree and wound the twine around it, securing it with deft knots. He whipped his knife from his pocket and cut off a length of rope from the loose end. This he stowed inside his shirt.

"Here goes!" he told Doris, and went up the taut and slanting rope, hand over hand.

FOR the first twenty feet the feat was easy for a man of Hatfield's strength and ability, but as he neared the burning building, the heat struck him like the fiery breath from a blast furnace. He gasped, his throat constricted, red flashes stormed before his eyes.

The flames were licking up the outer wall almost to the window ledge. They curled about Hatfield's legs as he clambered frantically over the sill and into the smoke-belching room that was lit by a lurid glow. He groped about until his hands encountered the old man's limp body lying just inside the window and a

little to one side.

Panting, choking, he hauled Holly's arms above his head and bound his wrists together with the short length of rope. Then he staggered to his feet, drawing the unconscious man erect and looped the bound arms about his own neck. Flames were flickering over the floor boards in a dozen places and the floor quivered beneath his feet. At any instant the supporting joists might burn through and drop them both into the furnace below.

Mustering all his strength, Hatfield clambered over the window sill, Holly's flaccid body hanging down his back. He gripped the rope and swung free.

"Now if the twine just doesn't bust!" he panted.

The stout sisal held, but for a moment Hatfield feared the task was too great for his strength. John Holly was a heavy man and his weight brought his bound arms against Hatfield's throat with about the same effect as a hangman's noose. The strangling pressure shut off the Lone Wolf's breath and threw him off balance.

For a terrible instant he swayed and dangled, the flames biting at his legs, the terrible heat sapping what was left of his strength. Behind him the floor fell in with a thunderous crash. Flame spouted out the window and flickered around the jerking rope.

But Hatfield knew that the long drop to the ground, under the circumstances, might easily result in death or serious injury to one or both. It was almost certain that the fire would do for them in any case. Frantically he began shuffling down the slanting rope. He could not go hand over hand, but had to keep a constant grip on the rope with both hands, which made progress frightfully slow.

Foot by torturing foot he inched along, panting, choking, his body numb, his brain a gathering fog. Behind him the flames roared and crackled. At any moment the burning building might collapse on their heads.

Ten feet he covered, in what seemed to him about ten hours. The heat lessened somewhat, but his strength was ebbing fast. Another five feet, five more. A jerk, a downward swoop and Hatfield felt himself flying through the air. The rope had burned through.

He struck the ground with a jar that sent fiery stabs of pain through his wounded leg. The limb buckled under him and he fell, to lie gulping and retching and all but unconscious.

It was Doris Holly, frantically endeavoring to free him from her father's strangling arms, who brought Hatfield out of the fog of exhaustion that enveloped him.

"Get the knife from my side pocket and cut the rope," he gasped.

She obeyed. The old man's choking arms fell away. Hatfield drew in great draughts of life-giving air. Rather weakly he struggled to a sitting position, shaking his head to free his brain of cobwebs.

"Are—are you all right, Jim Hatfield?" Doris sobbed. "Are you hurt?'

"Just shook up a mite," Hatfield replied. "I'll be all right in a minute."

He bent over the man he had rescued. Old John was breathing stertorously and his face was purplish, but his heart was going strong.

"Find my hat—there it is over there on the ground—and get some water from the crik," Hatfield told Doris, and began chafing Holly's wrists.

When she ran back with the water, she sprinkled the unconscious man's face with it. A moment more and old John groaned, rolled his head from side to side and opened his eyes, to gaze dazedly about. Hatfield helped him sit up, and for several moments, he was decidedly sick.

"Just smoke poisoning," Hatfield told him. "That's right, get it out of you and you'll be all right."

BEFORE long, Holly, weak and shaken but recovering rapidly, was on his feet. He wiped his mouth and swore feebly, glared at his burning ranchhouse, and swore with greater vigor.

"And now, suh," said the Lone Wolf, "maybe you can tell us what happened. How did you get the welt alongside your head?"

"From a gun-barrel," growled Holly. "I was settin' in the livin' room, readin', when I heard somebody on the porch outside. Just as I was gettin' out of my chair, the door banged open and a bunch of hellions wearin' black masks bulged in. Before I could do a thing, one of 'em belted me over the head with a gun. That's

all I remembered till I woke up layin' on the floor with the place on fire all around me. The door and windows was blocked so I tried to get up the stairs. I was already full of smoke and it kept gettin' thicker the higher I went. I tried to make it to the upstairs window, but before I could get there I keeled over again. That's the last I remember. How'd I get down here?"

His daughter told him, with vigor. Old John turned to Hatfield and held out a gnarled hand.

"Much obliged, son," he said simply.

"And they set fire to the house and left you in there to burn up!" Hatfield demanded. "For the love of Pete, why?"

"Reckon they was sort of riled because they didn't get my money," Holly growled. "There was more'n four thousand dollars in my little safe in the living room, up to yesterday. But yesterday the boys packed it to town with them to bank. They didn't get nothin'."

Hatfield gazed at him with narrowed eyes. "Who all knew you had that money in the safe?" he asked.

"Why, nobody, except the boys and Doris, I reckon," Holly replied. "Don't rec'lect tellin' anybody about it."

"But the safe was in plain view, I take it," Hatfield remarked. "Have any visitors since you landed up here?"

"Not many," said Holly. "Colonel Goodwin rode up from his spread down in the mouth of the Palo Duro. The next day he sent along his range boss and a couple of his hands with a wagonload of stuff he figgered I might be able to use. Ramon Bera, who owns a sheep ranch over to the west of here, has dropped in several times. He brought me a load of shingles he didn't need. Nice feller."

"Anybody else?" Hatfield pursued.

"Three days ago a big loud-mouthed galoot dropped in," Holly continued. "Said his name was Lawson, and that he had a spread down to the south a few miles. Talked sort of loco but 'peared to be all right."

Hatfield nodded, his face bleak, his eyes coldly gray.

"I reckon it was just some of that Black Riders bunch I heard so much about when I was over to Tascosa," Holly said. "Chances are some of 'em spotted me buyin' considerable stuff in town and figgered I had some *dinero* stashed."

He chuckled suddenly. "But when my range boss, Cliff Adams, gets back, he'll swear it was the ghost who was responsible."

"The ghost?"

"Uh-huh, the ghost of Moro."

"The ghost of *who!*"

"Moro was a owlhoot jigger who used to hang out somewhere in the Palo Duro," Holly explained. "He got hisself killed up on the Canadian a few years back. Folks say his ghost rides around these canyons and that somethin' bad happens to anybody that sees it. Ramon Bera believes the yarn. He begged me not to settle here but to come over west where he had his holdin's."

MEXICANS are always a superstitious lot of coots," observed Hatfield.

The old man nodded. "Yeah, down on the Nueces they were always seeing the ghosts of old Spaniards in armor ridin' around, and such like. Cliff Adams swears he saw the ghost the night we landed here. Says he saw him ridin' down the canyon all wrapped up in a black cloak and not makin' a sound. Said all of a sudden he disappeared in a puff of smoke. Cliff's got a prime imagination."

"Never took much stock in ghosts," Hatfield remarked.

"Me neither," said Holly. "And it sure wasn't no ghost of a gun-barrel that landed on my head. If it *was* a ghost gave me the whack, he sure was a pertickler able-bodied ha'nt."

He glowered at his still burning ranchhouse.

"And there goes a lot of hard work," he said. "Reckon we'll have to get busy pronto and build another one. I'm glad they didn't set fire to the bunkhouse and the barn, too. We can live in them for a spell."

"You feelin' all right now?" Hatfield asked. "You sure you hadn't better set a while?"

Old Holly grinned weakly. "Well, I'm plumb empty. Eatin' smoke ain't pertickler satisfyin', and it sure makes you get rid of the rest of your vittles. There's a store-room in the back of the barn with plenty of supplies laid up. And the bunkhouse is heated by a cookin' stove.

Suppose we throw some chuck together. Nothin' we can do out here."

He looked at his daughter. "Where did you find this fine young feller, Doris? You sure corralled him at just the right time."

Hatfield built a fire in the bunkhouse stove and Doris proved herself an excellent cook. The meal she quickly and deftly prepared was tasty and satisfying.

"Honey," old John told her as he shoved back his chair, "some lucky feller is goin' to get a mighty fine wife in you. Say, that hot stove sure made your cheeks rosy!"

CHAPTER IX

Maverick Trail

DESPITE the fact that Hatfield was exhausted by his terrific exertions and the bunk on which he lay was comfortable enough, he had trouble getting to sleep.

The happenings in the canyon had him profoundly puzzled. The burning of the ranchouse and the apparently wanton attempt on John Holly's life just didn't make sense. Hatfield knew well that even the most vicious owlhoots seldom go in for motiveless killings. Not from any fastidiousness on their part but purely as a matter of policy.

Stealings arouse popular indignation at the time of their happening, but they are usually soon forgotten, even by those suffering loss. But a man who is killed is liable to have relatives or friends with long memories who devote their energies to running down his killers. No outlaw, no matter how salty, cares to be on the receiving end of the vengeance trail.

The callous committing of the old rancher to a dreadful death could hardly be attributed to irritation resulting from finding his safe empty. Of that Hatfield felt sure. He was confident that there was a more practical motivation for the act.

"And if I can just find out what that

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"
Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp
IT'S EASIER than you think! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic checks Dry Scalp . . . makes a world of difference in the good looks of your hair. It's ideal with massage before shampooing, too. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. It's double care . . . for both scalp and hair . . . and it's economical.
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is, I'll be a long way toward cleaning up this mess" he told himself with conviction. "If Holly was an old resident here, and had aroused enmity by some act, the explanation would be simple enough. But he's a stranger, hardly had time to get acquainted, certainly hasn't been here long enough to get somebody on the prod against him. Well, in the morning I'll have a look at what's left of that buildin'. I've got a hunch something I'll find in the ashes will be plumb interestin'."

Comforted by this thought, he at last managed to get to sleep.

It was the rattle of cooking utensils that aroused him shortly after daybreak the following morning. Doris already had a fire going in the stove and was busy preparing breakfast.

Old John thrust a tousled head from beneath his blankets, indulged in a little mild morning profanity and began drawing on his boots.

After a sluice in the cold water of the trough in the back of the barn and a good breakfast, washed down by numerous cups of steaming coffee, Hatfield felt himself again. He joined Holly, who was rumbling around the ruins of his ranchhouse. Hatfield walked through the still warm ashes and heaved aside some half-burned floor joists and other timbers.

"Reckon that's your safe, suh?" he remarked, gesturing toward a sturdy little fire-blackened iron box that sagged drunkenly amid the debris.

"By gosh, it is," agreed Holly.

"And you'll notice, suh," Hatfield continued, "that the door is shut and shows no signs of being tampered with. Not a scratch on the surface and the combination knob and handle are in place."

"Why, that's right," admitted the ranch owner. "What in blazes! Didn't the hellions try to bust it open?"

"From all appearances they didn't," Hatfield said quietly. "I'd say they never laid a hand on it."

He stooped over and carefully brushed away the dust and ashes from the combination knob, revealing the numbers cut in the perimeter and plainly readable.

"Take a look at the numbers and see if you can tell whether the knob has been moved," he directed.

Holly leaned close and peered with puckered eyes.

"By gosh, it hasn't," he growled. "She was set to open, because there wasn't nothin' valuable locked inside, nothin' but some receipts and accounts. It's still set that way."

Hatfield nodded. He gripped the handle, and with considerable difficulty swung back the door on its scorched hinges. The wooden facing of a couple of drawers had been charred away, but on the steel shelves lay the crisped and blackened remains of bundles of papers.

"The safe wasn't opened," he declared. "Otherwise the papers would surely have been rooted out. They burned right there in the drawers."

OLD JOHN stared in bewilderment. "But if the hellions wasn't after the money, what in blazes *was* they after?"

"That," Hatfield replied grimly, "is what I would like to know."

Holly was about to reply, when a great voice boomed down from the canyon rim:

"Hey, what in fire and blazes has been goin' on down there?"

Hatfield glanced up quickly and saw a broad, squat man sitting a horse at the edge of the rock slide. He instantly recognized "Bull" Lawson.

"Come on down!" shouted Holly.

Lawson came down, like a miniature avalanche.

"The loco jughead!" snorted Holly. "If he don't bust his horse's neck, and his own, too, it'll be a wonder!"

Lawson didn't bust either. He hit the canyon floor in a shower of dust and loosened stones and jerked his mount to a slithering halt.

"Burned out, eh?" he rumbled. "How'd it catch?"

Holly told him, in detail. Lawson raised both huge fists to the heavens and swore a stream of vivid profanity.

"The ornery yaller sons of domestic animals!" he finished. "Oh, excuse me, ma'am." He jerked off his hat at sight of Doris emerging from the bunkhouse. "I didn't mean to cuss, but them gol-blasted . . . Excuse me again. Reckon I'd better keep my big mouth shut, but a thing like this makes me bile plumb over. I don't know what this country is comin' to. Gettin' worse all the time. Gettin' so a peaceful man like myself is scared to step out his front door."

Hatfield regarded Lawson curiously. If the big fellow's anger wasn't genuine, he was certainly doing a superb job of acting. Lawson wagged his bristly head and rumbled in his throat. His truculent blue eyes centered on the Ranger.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, "Aren't you the big feller was standin' at the bar the night we had that little shindig in Jenkins' place? Quite a ruckus, wasn't it? After I got outside I got so done up I headed right back for my spread. Wasn't no place for a peaceful man."

"Uh-huh, I noticed you did all you could to keep down trouble," Hatfield agreed gravely.

Bull Lawson roared with laughter. "Tom Bailey's still got a lump on his head where that jigger whacked him with a bottle," he chuckled. "Tom is sort of ringey. It was him shot the holes in the ceilin'. Lucky Val Weston, my range boss, knocked his arm up. Val knows I don't believe in gun-pullin' during a friendly argument. I told Tom off plenty when I got outside. Holly, you'll need a new house in a hurry. Gets cold up here before you know it. I'm ridin' back to my place. I'll round up my boys and all the tools and stuff we can lay our hands to. We'll get over here pronto and lend you a hand. Neighbors got to stand together."

With a wave of his hand, he went storming back up the rock slide.

"Sort of like havin' a cyclone drop in for a gabfest," chuckled old John. "But I've a notion he's the sort that get's things done."

"Yes, I've a notion he is," Hatfield agreed soberly, his eyes on the lip of the roadway, over which Lawson had disappeared from sight. "How far is it to his ranchhouse?"

"Nigh onto twenty miles, I understand," Holly replied. "Say, that jigger sure must have got up early."

"Or stayed up all night," Hatfield remarked. "Now what's to do?"

"Nothin' much, I reckon," said Holly. "Nothin' much we can do till the boys get back, and that won't be before evenin' at best."

Hatfield turned and gazed across to the far canyon wall, misty with distance.

"I've a notion to take a ride while we're waiting," he announced. "I'd like to give this gulch a look-over. It's an interestin' formation."

"That's a good notion," conceded Holly. "I'll ride with you. Doris can keep an eye on things while we're gone."

HATFIELD hesitated. Somehow he didn't like the idea of leaving that girl alone at the scene of the ominous happenings of the night before. But he hardly knew how to put his objections into words.

It was Doris who settled the matter for him.

"You two go ahead," she said. "This bunkhouse is a mess. I want to give it a good scrubbing. And I want to arrange my quarters in the covered chuckwagon again. Looks like I'll go back to sleeping there for a spell. Go ahead and take your ride. I'll do better without a couple of men underfoot."

"Come on, Hatfield," chuckled old John. "There's no arg'fyin' with her when she gets on that trail."

They got the rigs on their horses and set out. While old John jabbered along at a great rate, Hatfield set the pace and the direction, the ranch owner offering no objections. They ambled down-canyon until they were close to the Lighthouse. Hatfield gazed at the mighty spire with interest.

"That would be quite a watch tower if a feller could get to the top," he remarked. "From up there you could see all over for miles."

"Uh-huh, but he'd need wings to make it," said Holly.

Leaving the tower, they veered across the canyon to the far wall. Hatfield's keen eyes missed nothing in the course of the ride. When they were within the shadow of the tall cliffs he suddenly pointed to the ground.

"Looks like there's been quite a few cows along here of late," he observed.

Old John peered at the multitude of prints scarring a patch of soft soil.

"By gosh, it sure looks that way," he agreed. "That's funny. Don't rec'lect any of my critters strayin' down here. The grass is a heap better farther up the gulch, and there's no water over here. But I reckon some of 'em must have ambled down in the night-time. Didn't like the look of things, chances are, and moseyed back where they came from."

Hatfield nodded, without comment, but the concentration furrow deepened between his black brows. A sure sign that Lone Wolf was doing some hard thinking. He turned Goldy's nose up-canyon and rode on, scanning the ground from time to time.

Holly did not refer to the track again, but Hatfield quickly became convinced that a sizable herd had passed up the gorge only a few days before. His interest deepened when he spotted the tracks of shod horses among the hoof prints. He did not mention his discovery to his companion.

Soon the line of prints merged with a multitude of others and they passed clumps of cattle bearing Holly's Tumbling H brand.

"Good looking beefs," Hatfield remarked.

"Uh-huh, I got good stock," Holly said proudly. "And this is fine range. Did you ever see taller or thicker grass? The critters are fattenin' up fast. It was a prime herd I sent to the railroad the other day. All of 'em heavy. I aim to do well here. Which was more'n I was doin' down on the Nueces. Last summer the windmills didn't pump a thing but air, and you could fry eggs on the rocks."

Hatfield noded. "A heap better climate here," he agreed. "But they say they have bad blizzards sometimes in the winter."

"Maybe so," old John conceded, "but in this sheltered gulch I don't figger to have much trouble weatherin' 'em. Lots of narrow side canyons for critters to hole up in durin' a bad spell. Uh-huh, it's a fine section. Will be a heap better when the lawmen clean out such galoots as them blasted Black Riders. I reckon they'll do it, all right, but if you ask me, it will take the Rangers to handle the chore. Send a feller like Iron-hand Arlington or Billl McDowell up here and they'd have 'em hogtied in a jiffy!"

CHAPTER X

Wanted—a Break

RIDING on, Hatfield and old Holly saw more cows and passed narrow side canyons. For miles they rode over rich grassland. But gradually the soil changed. The canyon floor sloped steadily upward, while hard-baked clay and naked rock took the place of good pasture. Bristles of dense chaparral became more frequent and no streams flowed from the gloomy, high-walled side canyons.

But as they drew into this forbidding terrain, Hatfield's interest in his surroundings appeared to increase. His keen eyes roved in every direction, probing thickets, peering into gorges, noting the movements of birds on the wing and little animals in the brush. He uttered an exclamation of satisfaction, under his breath, when, on a patch of softer ground, he noted hoof marks of cattle and a few prints left by steel shoes.

Old John finally pulled to a halt.

"Nothin' more worth seein' up here," he said. "Just rocks and brush. Reckon we might as well amble back. It's gettin' late and I want to be there when the boys show up."

Hatfield offered no objections and they rode back down the canyon at a good pace. It wanted a couple of hours of sundown when they reached the site of the burned ranchhouse.

As they drew near the buildings, it became apparent that a visitor had arrived during their absence. A tall bay horse stood tethered to the tree that the night before had proved the salvation of old John.

"That's Ramon Bera's cayuse, or I'm a heap mistook," said Holly. "Uh-huh, and there's Bera himself standin' in the bunkhouse door. Hi-yuh, Don Ramon?"

Doris appeared in the doorway as they dismounted.

"Hello, Dad—hello, Jim Hatfield!" she called gaily. "Don Ramon just rode in. I've been telling him about what happened." She came down the steps, tightening the belt of her overalls, and stopped beside the Ranger's golden horse. "Do you think Goldy would let me mount him?" she asked.

"Reckon he will if I give the word," Hatfield assured her. "Wait, I'll shorten the stirrup straps."

He adjusted the straps deftly, then cupped his hands about her slim waist and swung her lightly into the saddle.

"Goodness, but you're strong!" she ex-

claimed. "You toss me around as if I was a—a—"

"A deer?" Hatfield completed for her.

She reddened, but laughed.

"It depends on how you spell it," she retorted, and was off at a gallop.

Hatfield turned to find Ramon Bera regarding him intently, an inscrutable look in his darkly blue eyes.

However, Bera shook hands cordially enough when Holly performed the introductions. He spoke with vigor concerning the burning of the ranchhouse and the attempt on Holly's life.

"It's getting so nobody and nothing is safe any more," he declared. "I thought sheep were safe from such depredations, but only last week I lost a fine flock. I've been posting guards since then."

"Sheep are worth money same as cattle, and there is a ready market for 'em," Hatfield commented. "But it takes more than ordinary rustler nerve to lift them. Sheep travel their own pace. There's no shovin' 'em like cows. Those jiggers must have figured a quick and easy way to get rid of 'em."

"They seem to figure everything out, in just the right way," said Bera. "I raised sheep for years down in the Nueces country, and never lost a head."

Hatfield was about to reply when a raucous bellow sounded from the canyon rim. Looking up he saw Bull Lawson waving his hand. A moment later, two heavily loaded wagons each drawn by four prancing and apparently half-wild horses hove into view.

"Here we come!" roared Lawson. "Clear the way!"

"You'll bust your fool necks if you try to bring them wagons down the slide!" old John bellowed in return. "Unpack 'em and lower the stuff with ropes."

"Take too long," Lawson bawled back. "I'm bringin' one down. Tom Bailey's handlin' the other one. We'll make it. Pow-w-w-der River!"

HE CLAMBERED onto the seat of the lead wagon as he spoke, and roared to the horses. Over the lip they shot, and down the slide, the wagon leaping and bounding over the stones, Lawson whooping encouragement. Close behind him thundered the second wagon, the choleric Bailey shouting and snapping his bull whip. After them streamed the Bradded L punchers, ten in number.

Hatfield held his breath as the wagons lurched and careened, the tires throwing out showers of sparks. It didn't seem possible that they could make it without a smashup.

But Lawson was without doubt a master teamster, and Bailey was close to being his equal. They handled the snorting, squealing horses as if they were ambling lambs. In a cloud of dust and flying stones the wagons reached level ground, the whooping cowboys racing around and past them.

Bull Lawson dropped to the ground and did a wild jig.

"Told you we'd make it!" he boomed. "We're all set to go—tools, lumber, ev-everything, and plenty of jiggers to use 'em." He turned and shouted to his men: "Hop to it, you work dodgers, and make camp. Look out, everybody! Here comes our chuckwagon!"

A clumsy, covered vehicle came scudding over the rim, a wizened old Mexican cook bouncing around on the seat-box and squalling profanity at his horses in two languages. The previous hair-raising performance was repeated, with variations. The chuckwagon reached the canyon floor on two wheels but righted with a bang of tires on the stones. The old cook hopped down like an animated jjumping-jack and began hauling utensils from the wagon bed.

"Lord, what an outfit!" Hatfield muttered. "I'd just as soon ride trail with a bunch of Comanches filled with tarantula juice!"

Doris dashed up on Goldy at that moment. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes bright with exhilaration. Her brown curls were flying in wild disorder.

Bull Lawson ducked his head and grinned. Ramon Bera smiled gravely. The Bradded L cowboys regarded her with frank admiration.

Hatfield reached up and swung her from the saddle. She clung to his arms an instant.

"I'd cook for you all the rest of my life just to get to ride that horse regularly," she whispered, and darted into the bunkhouse.

Hatfield again noted Ramon Bera regarding him intently with slightly nar-

rowed eyes.

"Here come my boys!" John Holly exclaimed as a group of horsemen appeared on the canyon rim and rode down the slide.

The Tumbling H punchers volleyed questions as soon as they reached the canyon floor. The questions changed to remarks tinged with sulphur as they gathered what had happened. . . .

Work on the new ranchhouse began at daybreak the following morning. Bull Lawson was everywhere at once, driving his men to greater efforts, doing more work than any two.

But it was Jim Hatfield who quietly took charge of the construction, showing a greater knowledge of building details than anyone else present, solving problems with ease, and improving on John Holly's plans.

"Feller, you sure know plenty about this sort of chore," Bull Lawson remarked admiringly, swabbing his sweaty and blackened face with a huge and hairy forearm. "You must have done considerable of it in your time."

"I've helped throw together a shack or two," Hatfield admitted.

He did not consider it necessary to mention that before he joined the Rangers he had had three years in a famous college of engineering, a subject in which he had never lost interest and which had proved valuble more than once in the course of his Ranger activities.

Ramon Bera had ridden off at dawn, headed for town, and promising to arrange for a speedy shipment of nails and other needed materials. He conversed with the old cook, in Spanish, for a few moments before departing. Jim Hatfield, who had stood within hearing distance, watched him top the canyon rim. Then he approached the cook.

"Castellano?" he asked quietly.

The cook shot him a quick glance.

"So I would say, *Capitan,"* he replied. "Certainly not *Espanol Mejicano."*

"Gracias, Miguel," Hatfield said, and returned to work.

UNDER Hatfield's competent supervision and Bull Lawson's energetic driving, the new ranchhouse rose apace. Hatfield estimated that a week of steady work would complete a better building than had formerly stood on the blackened foundation stones.

Meanwhile, Hatfield had been gathering some valuable information. He learned that most of the cows stolen in the vicinity had been lifted from spreads to the east and north of the Palo Duro, a fact to which he attached peculiar significance.

"If I can just get a break, I'll be on my way to drop a loop on those hellions," he told himself.

Hatfield had evolved a startling theory concerning the mysterious Black Riders and their depredations. He was playing a hunch, but it was a hunch that he believed would pay off.

"Not much to go on, yet," he admitted. "But if I can just get a break!"

The break was in the making even then.

CHAPTER XI

Rustler Loot

OLD BRANCH VANE, owner of the big Lazy V spread between Amarillo and the Canadian, was proud of his improved stock. Vane had a shrewd business head, and he was a man of vision.

"The time's comin', and comin' sooner than lots of jiggers believe, when folks are goin' to demand better meat," he was wont to say. "And with all the prosperity buildin' up in the country, they are goin' to have the money to pay for it. The time's comin' when there won't be no market for the longhorn. Us fellers might as well admit it, and get ready."

Vane was a prophet without honor in his own country, but a true prophet just the same. In fact, others were developing a disquieting feeling that Vane might be right. Certainly his cows brought higher prices than those of his neighbors. Vane had as yet far from attained what the future would bring in improved cattle, but already his cross-bred cows were undoubtedly superior to the rangy longhorn. They were heavier, better fleshed. True, they demanded more attention, but as recompense for this, they were easier to handle.

So Branch Vane was in a complacent mood when, four days after the fire in Lighthouse Canyon, he rode home from inspecting the shipping herd he was getting together on his south pasture.

"Them cows are going to bring plenty of *dinero*," he told his range boss. "Just wait till Tom Brundage and his pards see what I cash in. They'll be comin' around to my way of thinkin' after this."

The herd was bedded down for the night, which promised rain. Two night hawks stood guard.

"Two's plenty," Vane decided, looking it over. "Them critters don't stampede at every puff of wind like the old mossybacks do. Two fellers can keep 'em bunched without any trouble."

The range boss was dubious as to the wisdom of the decision, but he had learned not to argue with Vane when one of his pet theories was the subject under discussion. Anyhow he was forced to admit that the Lazy V cows were docile. And there had been no widelooping here to the south. So he kept his opinions to himself.

Rain began falling soon after dark. It was not a hard rain, but steady. There was no lightning, no thunder, and no wind. The bunched cattle lay with steaming backs, grunting and rumbling contentedly.

The two night hawks had built a little brush shelter at the edge of a thicket. They squatted under it beside a small fire. From time to time one would go out and take a routine ride around the herd. Otherwise they had nothing to do and time dragged.

About ten o'clock they decided it was time to make some coffee. As they busied themselves over the fire, one of them suddenly raised his head.

"Thought I heard somethin' move in the brush over there to the left," he explained.

His companion shrugged. "Coyote, the chances are," he replied. "They—"

His voice was drowned by a roar of gunfire. Both guards pitched to the ground to lie without sound or motion, riddled by bullets. The cows came to their feet with startled bellows.

From the brush to the left streamed a dozen horsemen. They quickly surrounded the herd and got it in motion. South by west they shoved the protesting cows along at top speed.

It was well after daybreak of the gray, rainy morning when old Branch Vane and his hands arrived at the pasture and discovered their loss, and what was left of the two night hawks. Vane mingled his bitter oaths with those of his hands, and swore vengeance.

The grizzled range boss broke in on the profanity.

"There's no use cussin' over what's happened," he said tartly. "Come on, we're goin' after them sidewinders. It's still rainin' and the trail's plain. The grass don't rise up right away when it's wet like this. . . . Come on! We're wastin' time. They got hours' start as it is."

SILENT, grim of face, the cattleland posse rode at a fast and steady pace, following the trail of the wet and crushed grass. Hour after hour they rode. Noontime came and passed. The rain had ceased and the sun was breaking through the clouds.

"For the love of Pete!" swore Branch Vane. "Where are them hellions headed for? We're miles and miles south of Amarillo."

The range boss was staring ahead, his brows drawn together in a frown.

"I've got a notion they're headed for the desert," he said.

"You're loco!" old Branch snorted. "Nobody could drive a herd across that desert, and you know it."

"Mebbe," insisted the range boss. "But I'll bet a hatful of pesos that's where they're headed for. Look! Their trail's turning' into the old Tucumcari buffalo track, and that leads straight to the desert."

The buffalo track was a deep depression nearly a hundred yards in width, beaten out by myriad hoofs through untold ages. Why it ran to the desert's edge and ended there nobody had ever been able to figure. The posse turned into it, still following the trail of the rustlers. Branch Vane snorted and swore, but there was the trail, rolling on in front of them.

Mile after mile they rode, with the sun beating down with burning rays. The grass was thinning out, the soil becoming hard and stony. Less than a mile ahead was the dead, gray expanse of the wasteland. And out onto the glaring white surface led the trail!

"By gosh, I got it," Branch Vane suddenly exclaimed. "The sidewinders spotted us trailin' 'em, from some hilltop, and they're makin' a run for it the only way they can hope to give us the slip. That's why they took to the desert. Ride, you jugheads! Where they go we can follow."

"But we won't follow for long, not over that desert," grunted the range boss. "The sand's already plumb dry and the wind's gettin' up. Them tracks will be filled with driftin' sand in no time once it gets a mite stronger."

"We'll get 'em," repeated Vane. "Let's go!"

Fired by his enthusiasm, the cowboys urged their tired horses to greater effort. Ten minutes later and they were sweeping across the desert sands.

But the wind was strengthening by the minute. Already the air was filled with an uneasy rustling, an eerie whispering that mourned about the riders like the faint susurus of the incoming tide. The sands were beginning to move.

Branch Vane suddenly stood in his stirrups, shading his eyes with his hand.

"There they are!" he shouted. "Look!"

The others peering in the direction he indicated, could just make out a multitude of tiny moving dots, miles ahead.

"It's them!" exulted Vane. "I was right. They're tryin' to make a get-away. After 'em!"

Men and horses were already suffering severely from thirst, but the excitement of the chase bore them up. They surged on another mile. The moving dots had grown to dark blotches that would soon take form as horsemen and cattle.

But now the sands were moving in earnest. The tracks they followed were swiftly shallowing. The sun was dimmed by a yellowish mist. And Branch Vane, peering ahead, suddenly saw the moving blotches vanish as if wiped out of existence!

A roaring gust tore past the posse, raising the sand in stifling clouds. The red sun disappeared. The air was filled with flying yellow shadows.

Branch Vane, desert-wise, abruptly came to his senses. He jerked his horse to a halt.

"Back!" he shouted above the roar of the wind. "Back! We got no time to waste."

BEFORE they won free of the desert, Branch Vane and his hands were steeling their souls against impending death. But at last the near exhausted horses bore them into clear air. Blackened tongues protruded between cracked and bleeding lips. Eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. Men and horses were powdered with gray dust.

"There's a crik a few miles to the northeast of here," croaked Vane. "We've got to get water soon or we're done."

As they rode, the clear air revived them somewhat.

The creek came into view at last, gleaming like molten silver in the late sunlight. "We lost the cows," said Vane, "but them hellions won't never rustle another herd. The desert got them, all right."

"Unless they know where there's water and shelter out there and were headin' for it," remarked the range boss.

"You're loco!" snorted Vane. "Everybody knows there's no water between here and the mountains. . . ."

Cliff Adams, the range boss of old Holly's spread, who had been sent to Amarillo on a chore, brought the news of the raid on the Lazy V to the canyon.

"I talked with Vane and Stiffy, his range boss," Adams said. "Vane is plumb sure the desert got those hellions, but Stiffy 'lows they might know where there's water out there and were headin' for it. Vane says he's loco."

"Sure, he's loco," growled Bull Lawson, who was still with his hands helping to build Holly a new ranchhouse. "If there was water out there, it's mighty funny folks who have lived hereabouts all their lives never heard about it."

"I dunno," said Adams. "Remember the Lost Lakes down to the south of here. Folks who lived around there all their lives didn't believe they existed. But Ironhand Arlington and his Rangers found 'em a few years back. That's history, feller."

"You say the wideloopers followed the old buffalo track to the desert?" Hatfield asked, speaking for the first time.

"That's right," Adams told him. "That's what Vane told me. . . ."

Hatfield was not far wrong in his estimate of how long it would take to build

the ranchhouse. On the evening of the eighth day the job was finished to the last shingle and window frame.

Old John Holly had decided that a house warming was in order when the building was done. To that end he had procured liquor and other refreshments from Amarillo. Bull Lawson rounded up a fiddler and a banjo player and they had a grand shindig the following day.

Everybody was in a gay mood except Doris. Hatfield finally cornered her in the kitchen, alone, and asked what was the matter.

"You look like somebody'd done swiped the silver lining off your cloud," he told her. "What's wrong anyhow?"

Doris ignored the question and asked one of her own.

"I suppose now that the ranchhouse is finished you'll be riding off somewhere?"

"Not yet," Hatfield said, and smiled. "I aim to ride to town tomorrow, but I'll be back."

The girl's eyes brightened. 'May I ride with you?" she asked eagerly.

Hatfield shook his head. "Not this time," he said, "but we'll have a ride together when I get back."

"That's a promise?"

"Sure it's a promise. Word of honor. Hope to die and swallow fish hooks."

Doris laughed gaily. "Come on!" she said. "They're starting the music again. Let's dance!"

The merrymaking went on, for a time, then Bull Lawson and his hands pulled out shortly after dark.

"Want to get home before it's too late," he explained. "We got a chore of gettin' a shippin' herd together to finish. We knocked off to 'tend to this business over here. Got two or three days more work to do on it yet. *Adios.* If any more of the blasted Black Riders show up, bust a single-tree over their heads."

CHAPTER XII

Death's Garden

JIM HATFIELD rode away from the canyon early the following morning. But he did not turn north of Amarillo. Instead, his course was almost due south. Gradually, however, he veered to the west. Shortly after noon he hit the old Tucumcari buffalo track.

How many thousands of years, Hatfield wondered, had the trudging hoofs of the bison taken to beat out this miniature canyon spanning the grasslands for so many miles? And why had they taken this course? Perhaps the land that was now the arid desert was different then.

But Hatfield did not think so. The desert was far older than the trail. Older than the bison. It undoubtedly dated back to the last tremendous upheaval that created the Rocky Mountain chain and the subsidence that followed.

Once it had been a great inland sea or lake, its borders crowned by a rank vegetation. The raising of the mountains had changed the course of the streams that fed the sea and gradually its waters had evaporated, impregnating the soil beneath with salt and acids and leaving behind the vast depression of arid death. Beneath the drifting sands were billions of lifeforms in petrefaction, but its surface was a lifeless waste and must have been so for at least a million years.

No, the buffalo had crossed the desert to the grasslands at the foot of the mountains of New Mexico, lands that were formerly perhaps of greater extent and luxuriance.

"And they must have known where to find water somewhere halfway across," the Lone Wolf mused. "Of course that source of water supply may long since have dried up. But legend says the Indians made the crossing often, with their families and their bands of horses, just as they made the crossing by way of the Lost Lakes Arlington discovered. It isn't logical to believe that the possible water supply has vanished since their time. After all that wasn't so many years back. . . . Well, here goes to play a hunch."

Another hour of steady riding and he was passing through the stony border of the desert. At last he reached the beginning of the wastelands. He pulled Goldy to a halt, rolled a cigarette, and sat thinking.

Hatfield was thoroughly familiar with the Plains Indians and their ways. He knew that their mode of life followed an orderly pattern from which they rarely

deviated. They were creatures of habit. As their fathers did, so did they. Which was one reason for their subjection by the more versatile white man who was better able to adapt himself to changed or varying conditions. It was not a lucky break but his knowledge of the red man and his ways that had enabled Arlington to discover the clue that led him to the Lost Lakes, believed by the inhabitants of the section to be non-existent.

With Arlington's experience in mind, Hatfield dismounted from his horse and began a meticulous examination of the terrain where the buffalo track entered the desert.

"It's just a hunch," he repeated to himself, "but I believe it's worth playing. If there's water out there somewhere, it's plumb nonsense to go looking blindly for it in that limitless waste of sand and alkali. Here everything looks alike and surface indications are absent or deceiving."

Hatfield knew that what he sought would not be in the open. It would be well concealed in accordance with the dictates of the furtive Indian mind. But it would be amid surroundings toward which that same mind would unerringly trend.

The terrain adjacent to the buffalo track was a jumble of boulders and rock formations. Amid these he conducted his search, for a long time with no results. Finally, after more than an hour's hunting, he discoverd what he sought.

It was placed in a deep cleft under an overhang of stone that faced the desert, sheltered from sun and wind. A thousand white men might casually pass that way and never note it.

In the depths of the cleft, upright in the ground, was the bleached shoulder bone of a giant buffalo, an enormous fan-shaped bone seventeen inches long, twelve inches wide at one end and two inches at the other. It was the white blackboard of the Plains, on which the Indians inscribed picture messages for the next passerby.

LIMNED on the smooth white surface was a creditably done sketch in the weather-resisting mineral paints used by the Indians—red, yellow and blue.

The foreground was undoubtedly the gray-yellow expanse of the desert running up to a towering wall of rock done in blue. To one side was a tall mound not unlike a gigantic anthill. In the shadow of the wall were Indian tepees with men, women and children grouped about them, one woman standing beside a fire, apparently cooking. Over the fire hung a pot. There were sketches of horses. Approaching the campfire, from the desert, was an Indian leading a pony with a travois loaded with camp equipment.

To Hatfield the message was plain. It depicted a spot favorable for camping. The rock ledge furnished shade. The pot over the fire said plainly that water was to be had. The Indian with the laden pony declared that the spot was to be reached from the desert and from the east.

The keen edge of the great vane would point in the direction in which one should travel to reach this oasis. It should also be in line with a landmark that would guide the traveler across the trackless wastes.

Hatfield walked around the sign board and gazed straight across the pointing vane, raising his eyes from the desert's surface.

The vane slanted slightly to the north. As his gaze rose it at length centered on many miles of the desert, but clearly visible in that rarefied atmosphere, was a mountain or, rather, twin mountains that looked like the bosom of a sleeping woman. He knew them to be Tucumcari Peaks in New Mexico. Straight toward the southern peak pointed the painted signboard.

"That's it," the Ranger muttered to himself as he mounted his horse. "Keep the south Tucumcari Peak in line and you hit the place. Clear as a printed page. But there's a lot of sand and alkali between here and there."

He squinted into the distance, then said aloud, with a short laugh:

"Well, here goes. I'm getting one lucky break. There's no wind today."

Before he had ridden a mile, however, Hatfield realized that although he was not unacquainted with deserts, he had greatly underestimated the lethal powers of this one. The burning sun was not its only threat. The stored-up heat in the sands beat upward like the breath from a blast furnace. The feverish glare quickly affected his eyes, causing them to

smart and burn, and clouding his vision.

From time to time he wet his lips and Goldy's tongue with water he carried in a canteen, observing the most rigid economy. Had he followed his inclinations, he would have finished off the entire contents of the container in the first hour. But he knew this would never do.

"We're taking a big chance, feller," he told the horse. "If we don't find water or shelter out here somewheres, or if a bad storm comes up, we're done. There'd be no breathing that dust for long."

Mile after mile they slogged along. The red ball of the sun sank lower, hung over the rounded breasts of Tucumcari. And as the blazing orb dropped toward the mountain peaks, a faint breath stirred the hot air, but there was nothing of refreshing coolness to it. It seemed hotter indeed than the still air.

Hatfield knew that the winds of the Tucumcari Desert were the equal of the midnight furnace winds of Death Valley in the Mohave. And here was the same poisonous dust that soon would stifle man and beast. He peered anxiously ahead—and suddenly uttered an exultant exclamation.

What appeared to be a dark cloud lay on the desert's face some miles to the northwest. It could only be the wall of cliffs depicted on the Indian map. He spoke to Goldy and the sorrel quickened his pace. Haven was ahead—if they could reach it.

BUT as the sun sank lower, the wind gained strength. Soon the sands were rustling and stirring. The rocky ledge ahead had now taken definite form, although it was still some miles distant. The red of the low-lying sun had deepened a sure sign that the impalpable poisonous dust was rising from the desert's floor. Another mile and Hatfield sensed the bitter taste of its presence in his mouth. He urged the sorrel to still greater efforts.

The sun now was a glaring red eye, and Tucumcari seemed washed in blood. Flying yellow shadows swooped and flickered in the upper air. His eyes fixed on the line of cliffs swelling upward from the moving sands, Hatfield hunched in his saddle and set his jaw.

"We'll make it feller," he comforted the weary golden sorrel. "Another mile, and we'll find shelter from this infernal wind and dust, even if there isn't any water. Chances are the wind will blow itself out soon after sundown, anyhow. Generally does in sections like this."

They made it, but with the sand swirling about them in clouds, its particles stinging the flesh like flakes of fire. Made it to the rock wall that overhung and shut off most of the wind.

For a quarter of a mile to the ledge the ground sloped upward and was stony, which lessened the dust. In the shelter of the cliff there was no dust to speak of. And the wind, which blew from the west, could not reach them there.

Hatfield got the rig off Goldy and sat down with his back to the cliff, thoroughly worn out. He was suffering badly from thirst, but was inclined to feel considerably more optimistic than he had for hours. Goldy stood with hanging head for a time, but soon lay down.

[Turn page]

When a Scheming Land-Grabber Turns the Town of Elysia into a Hotbed of Oppression, Jim Hatfield's Colts Sound the Call to Action in—

GUN PARADISE

By JACKSON COLE

NEXT ISSUE'S SMASHING COMPLETE TEXAS RANGER NOVEL!

As Hatfield had optimistically anticipated, a few hours after sunset the wind did lull and finally die down. The sky cleared. The desert was a wan mystery in the starlight. It turned to exquisite silver when the late moon rose and cast its beams across the endless sands.

Hatfield considered his position. He knew that the sensible thing would be to try and make it back to the grasslands, or to the mountains to the west, in the cooler hours of the night.

So far as he could ascertain there was not a sign of water anywhere. The cliff wall was unbroken. There was no vegetation, no deep hollows in which a spring might obtain. Nothing but sand and naked rock and dreary desolation. To the north of the ridge, which was of no great extent, a mere rock outcropping, in fact, was the fairly high mound shaped like a great anthill that was shown on the Indian signboard. In the moonlight, Hatfield walked around it. Its base covered about an acre of ground, but nowhere was there a hint of water. A disquieting thought entered his mind. Perhaps the Indians crossing the desert had packed along enough water to sustain them on their journey.

Then another thought came to revive his courage.

"Buffaloes don't pack water, and they're slow moving critters."

Which was all very well, but did not tend to allay his thirst. Returning to the cliff base he lay down near his horse.

"Maybe I'm plumb loco, but we're going to take a chance, feller," he told the sorrel.

Soon he sank into a troubled sleep, plagued by dreams of rippling streams and cool, shaded pools.

Dawn was breaking when Hatfield awoke. His lips were parched. His tongue was stiff, and his mouth felt like the inside of a lime kiln. His eyelids were stuck together and it took some time to rub them open. Finally he staggered to his feet and got the rig on Goldy who appeared thoroughly disgusted and not giving a care whether he lived or died.

"We've got to get around on the other side of these rocks, feller," he told the sorrel. "Once the sun is up we'll be getting the full benefit of it here."

Mounting, he rode around the south end of the outcropping. The west side of the ridge was as barren of moisture as the east. He continued to the north without encountering a hopeful sign. Near the northern terminus of the ledge and not far from the big mound, he halted and took the rig off the horse.

THEN he began another fruitless search for water. The deceptive cool of early morning had dissipated as the sun climbed the long slant of the sky. Already the heat was highly uncomfortable. Hatfield began to get badly worried. He gazed westward, estimating the distance to the mountains. It was fully as great as to the grasslands on the east. The outcropping where he had paused was just about midway across the desert.

As he gazed, he noted a number of black dots in the sky. Soon they resolved to a flock of birds winging eastward. They drew near. Abruptly they changed direction a little. A moment more and they were hovering over the crest of the tall mound. Then they dropped downward toward the hilltop and disappeared from his view.

"Now what are those feathered galoots stopping up there for?" he wondered. "Did they spot something to eat?"

Minutes passed and the birds did not reappear. Hatfield watched idly, having nothing else to do. Finally they did appear, circling upward, then winging steadily eastward to dwindle from view.

Hatfield stared after them. Suddenly his eyes blazed with excitement.

"Those jiggers would never try to cross the desert without a drink on the way!" he muttered. "Blazes! I wonder! But who ever heard of finding water on the top of a hill?"

But on a dark night, a single star is better than nothing. Hopelessly enough, Hatfield began climbing the gently sloping side of the mound. Upward he toiled, gasping in the heat.

Reaching the crest, for a moment he stood as if petrified. He was gazing down into a deep cup or indentation with gently sloping sides. And at the bottom of the cup, overhung by the rim to the north, was a pool of what was undoubtedly water! A wide pool that had the appearance of great depth.

Another moment and Hatfield was rushing down the slope. Here was water, or

a good imitation of it. Stretching out on the bank of the pool, he drank deeply. The water was a trifle brackish but was cool and of sufficiently good quality to relieve his thirst and sustain life, and there was plenty of it.

Licking his lips when he had drunk his fill, he glanced about. The ground was scored by a multitude of hoof prints, shod and otherwise.

"By gosh, here it is!" he exulted. "The stopping point midway across the desert. Buffalos and cows wouldn't have any trouble climbing the slope, and there's plenty of room here for a sizable herd. Yes, this is it!"

CHAPTER XIII

Rustlers' Back Door

NOW the mystery of the desert crossing was no longer a mystery. Halfway from the grasslands in the cool of the night. A day's rest beside the pool and in the shade of the ledge. Then another night's drive to the western mountains. Exultantly, Hatfield hurried down to get Goldy and relieve the sorrel's thirst.

He wondered why he had not noted hoof prints on the outer slope of the mound. But the explanation was simple. There was a covering of loose sand on the slope and the wind would quickly fill the prints and smooth them over.

The pool appeared to be of great depth. Doubtless it was fed by springs far down in the sands. Its walls were of naked rock. The earth lipping it was silt that had drifted in during untold years. Being sheltered by the tall mound, the pool had not been choked by sand.

"Well, there's no grass for you hereabouts," Hatfield told Goldy after the big horse had slaked his thirst, "and nothing to make a fire with. But I've got a few dry biscuits in the saddle pouch. Reckon we'll have to make out on them." He decided the best thing to do was spend the day here in the shade of the overhang and head back in the evening.

Goldy was not particularly fond of biscuits as a regular diet, but being hungry, he consented to share his rider's frugal meal.

"We've found how they do it," Hatfield mused as he munched the dry biscuits, "but I still don't know how to drop a loop on them. If we chase them here after they've lifted a herd, we may be able to bag some of them, but the chances are the big he-wolf of the pack wouldn't be along. I'd say, from the looks of him—if he's who I think he is—that he doesn't overexert himself when he doesn't have to. Chances are he doesn't come along on these chores at all. Once the cows are lifted and on their way, he leaves the rest to the hired hands."

Hatfield's thoughts ran on, and he found it a relief to hear his own voice putting them in words.

"I got a break when John Holly built a ranchhouse in Lighthouse Canyon and forced that rustler boss to shift his operations to the south. The way he handled it before his route up Lighthouse was blocked was plumb smart. Concentrated on the spreads to the north and east of the Palo Duro. While everybody was busy trying to nose him out along the northern routes to New Mexico, he'd slide the cows into the Palo Duro by some way he knows and then run 'em up Lighthouse to his holding spot, wherever that is. Then on a dark night he'd slide 'em out of the canyon and run them south to the buffalo track and on across the desert. Plumb simple when you see how it was done.

"But Holly put a crimp in his system. With the Tumbling H spread in Lighthouse, the rustler knew that sooner or later he'd be spotted. That was why he was so anxious for Holly not to settle there. And why he fired the ranchhouse and tried to do for Holly. Figured with him gone, the rest would pull up stakes and leave. Which would very likely have happened."

The Ranger made his accusation personal then, naming names.

"But as it is, Senor Ramon Bera, I'm right on your trail, and I'm getting a notion just how I'll drop a loop on you. Ghost of Moro! *You're* the ghost, but a ghost that never took the Big Jump, despite what everybody believed. You must be mighty good at swimming under water, even with a bullet-creased head!"

All through the hot hours, Hatfield and

Goldy drowsed in the shadow of the overhang, drinking frequently, regaining their strength. When the sun was hovering above the twin crests of Tucumcari, Hatfield rose to his feet and stretched his long arms over his head. He proceeded to get the rig on his horse.

He was just tightening the cinches when he heard a sound that tensed him to hair-trigger alertness. A sound of voices. He walked to the lip of the pool and stood waiting.

Two men topped the rim of the cup and started down the slope, each leading a horse. They were halfway down before they saw the grim form of the Lone Wolf blocking their way. They halted with startled exclamations, peering with outthrust necks. Then one uttered a yell and both went for their guns.

HATFIELD'S hands flashed down and up. A thunder of gunfire filled the cup.

Only a breath of time had passed when the Lone Wolf lowered his smoking Colts and peered through the powder fog at the two forms sprawled on the slope. He holstered one gun, wiped away a trickle of blood flowing down his cheek and walked forward. One glance, and he holstered his other Colt. The two would-be killers were satisfactorily dead.

With scarcely a glance at their bodies, Hatfield took the reins of their horses and led the mounts to the pool. While the animals were quenching their thirst, he noted that their saddle pouches were well plumped out. He upended the leather containers and poured, among other things, a flood of gold pieces onto the ground.

"The money they got for Branch Vane's herd, I'll bet a peso!" he exclaimed with satisfaction, as he stored the coin in his own pouch. "Well, this does for a couple more of the hellions. Makes four altogether. We're thinning them out a mite, anyhow."

The bodies of the two owlhoots disclosed nothing of significance. Hatfield pondered a moment, then loaded them on their horses.

"We'll just stow these fellers away in the cracks in the ledge down below," he decided. "We'll take the horses along with us, hide the rigs, and turn the critters loose on the grass. When those two sidewinders don't show up with the *dinero*, their bunch will figure they decided to make off with it, the chances are. Anyhow, they won't know what become of 'em and that's all that counts."

Crossing the desert during the cool hours of the night was quite different from riding the burning sands under a blazing sun. Hatfield made excellent time and reached the grasslands long before dawn. He veered north and rode until he came upon a stream of water. He turned Goldy and the owlhoots' horses loose to graze, built a fire and cooked himself a meal. Then he lay down and slept soundly until full daylight.

Midafternoon found him back at the Tumbling H ranchhouse, where he received a warm welcome.

"Was scared you'd decided to pull out," said old John as they sat together in the living room of the new ranchhouse as dark descended.

"Not yet," Hatfield told him.

At his feet lay his saddle pouches. He upended one and poured a stream of gold pieces onto the table between them.

"G-good gosh!" stuttered Holly, his eyes widening with astonishment. "Have you been robbin' a bank?"

"Nope," Hatfield replied cheerfully. "Just run across some jiggers that, the chances are, did rob one or two." As he spoke, he was fumbling with a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt. He laid something beside the gold.

Old John stared at the object with widening eyes. It was a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle, the feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers.

"G-good gosh!" he repeated. "So you're a Ranger! Well, I'd ought to have knowed it. You got Ranger writ all over you." Suddenly his eyes brightened with excitement. "Son, I got you placed!" he exclaimed. "I've heard tell of you—who hasn't? You're the Lone Wolf!"

"Been called that," Hatfield admitted.

"And you're here after the Black Riders," said Holly. "You must be! Got any line on the hellions?"

"Sort of," Hatfield replied, "but not enough to drop a loop on them yet. I hope to tie up a thread or two tomorrow. Aim to take a little ride up the canyon for a look-see."

"And where did you get all that *dinero*?"

THE Ranger told him, and disclosed all he had as yet learned about the Black Riders and their leader.

"I figure that gold belongs to Branch Vane," he concluded. "I'll hand you the chore of returning it to him. It isn't what his herd was worth, of course. Wideloopers never collect full value for the stuff they lift, but it will lessen his loss somewhat."

"And you figure Ramon Bera is the head of the Black Riders," marveled Holly. "I never would have believed it. He seems to be such a nice feller."

"Yes, he does," Hatfield admitted. "He's got plenty of savvy. But he makes slips, like all the owlhoot breed does. Trying to prevent you from settling in the canyon was one of 'em. Then he always seems to be around when something busts loose, like the night the Exchange Saloon was robbed."

Holly nodded. "Come to think of it, he did show up kind of fast the night my ranchhouse was burned."

"And he sure seemed a mite put out," declared the Ranger. "And remember when I asked you? You told me he was one of the few folks who had been to visit you, and in a position to know conditions here. But his real slip was in making such an effort to appear what he isn't? He made a point of talking Spanish to old Miguel, Bull Lawson's Mexican cook. I overheard them. The Spanish he used was the sort of Castilian Spanish one learns from a book, not Mexican Spanish, which is entirely different. I questioned Miguel about it and he agreed with me. And whenever a jigger tries to make out to be something he isn't, he'll bear watching."

"Well, now," said Holly admiringly, "who'd of thought it?"

"So," Hatfield went on, "by a process of elimination, I figured him to be the man we want. I had a mite of a notion about Bull Lawson, for a while. But Lawson just didn't fit right into the picture."

"And you figger Bera is really Carlos Moro, the owlhoot?"

"Yes," Hatfield replied, "I think he is. I'd be more certain if he had his whiskers shaved off. He operates like Moro. Moro did just the same sort of thing down on the Brazos. He posed as an honest rancher. Here, Bera poses as a sheep rancher and a Mexican and does a good chore of it."

"You don't think he's recognized you, do you?"

"I sure do. When those jiggers tried to do for me on the Amarillo Trail, I knew some of the old Moro bunch had spotted me. Then when I began hearing things about the Black Riders, I knew that it must be Moro's gang that was operating hereabouts. I didn't think of Moro himself because, like most folks, I believed he'd been killed. Later, though, I got to thinking considerable about him. So far as I was able to learn down on the Brazos, Moro was the brains of the outfit. The rest were just ordinary brush-popping scum, and it didn't seem likely that somebody else, with Moro's ability, had rounded them up and started them to working here."

"Funny, everybody thinkin' he's been dead all this time," the rancher said musingly.

The Ranger shrugged. "After all, nobody knew for sure that Moro was killed on the Canadian. He was shot and fell into the water. That was known. But the ruckus took place at night, and moonlight is deceptive. A man could swim underwater, if he wasn't too hard hit, and make a getaway. That's just what I figured Moro did. Of course, I may be wrong, but I don't believe I am."

"You don't strike me as the sort to be wrong, feller," Holly said firmly. "My money's on you."

To avoid comment and the observation of a possible watcher, Jim Hatfield rode up the canyon that morning in the company of Holly and the Tumbling H punchers, posing as a newly hired hand. Until afternoon he busied himself with routine range work, but working farther north all the time.

When he was far enough away and alone, he set out up the canyon at a fast pace. He did not slow down until he reached the spot where he and Holly had paused on their previous ride. Then he drew down to a walk, carefully scanning the ground. Soon he noted evidence of the passage of cattle.

FOR more than an hour he followed the fairly plain trail over the rocky soil of the canyon floor. The shadows of evening were growing long when the trail turned into a narrow, brush-grown side canyon.

Through the side gorge Hatfield rode

with the greatest care. He felt that his quarry could not be far off. Finally he drew rein, sniffing the air. He had caught the indubitable scent of wood smoke.

"Somebody up here, all right," he thought. "This has turned out plumb easy. Not surprisin', though. The hellions feel safe enough up here. Never any reason for anybody to ride up the canyon this far."

He figured it best, however, to leave Goldy here and slip up the rest of the way on foot.

He hitched the sorrel in a dense thicket and moved on, pausing often to peer and listen. The smell of wood smoke steadily grew more pronounced as he reached a point where the tangle of growth thinned. Peering through a final fringe of branches he saw that he was on the edge of a small clearing near the head of the canyon. Set in the clearing was a rather large cabin, evidently an old one. From the mud-and-stick chimney there spiraled up a thread of blue smoke.

Tensely alert, Hatfield surveyed the terrain. The canyon was a box, its end wall a steep slope up which wound a narrow track.

"Their back door into this place," came to the Lone Wolf's mind as he eyed the trail. "Too steep for cows, but a horse could make it. Now I wonder how many there are in that shack?"

He leaned forward, his attention fixed on the building. He jerked erect and started to turn as his keen ears caught a faint sound of rustling behind him.

"Hold it!" barked a harsh voice. "Don't you make a move! You're covered! Get your hands up and turn around!"

CHAPTER XIV

Outsmarted

SEETHING with impotent rage, the Lone Wolf obeyed. There was nothing else to do. He was "caught settin'." Abruptly he understood why the trail to the hideout had been so plain and easy to follow. His captor's remark as he turned confirmed his deduction.

"Figgered you'd be amblin' up here," said the squat, bearded man who stood glaring at him over the sights of a leveled gun-barrel. "Been waitin' for you all day. Turn back around, now, and keep your hands where they are. Make a move and you get it. I'm itchin' to plug you as it is."

Hatfield again obeyed. His squat captor moved forward, plucked away his gun-belts and holsters, and cleaned out his pockets.

"Now trail for the cabin," he ordered.

With the bearded man's toe rasping his heel and the fellow's gun muzzle against his back, Hatfield trailed. As they neared the cabin, another man appeared in the doorway, gun in hand. He uttered an exultant shout.

"Got him, eh, Gulden?" he whooped. "The boss was plumb right, per usual. Had this jigger all figgered out. And they say Rangers has got savvy. Ho! Ho! Ho!"

The squat man, Gulden, prodded Hatfield with his gun barrel.

"Get in there!" he growled. "Set down on that chair. Want to look you over."

While his companion stood to one side, gun in hand, the bearded Gulden hung Hatfield's belts on a nail, rolled a cigarette, and lit it, meanwhile regarding his captive with a deadly eye.

"If I had my way, I'd do for you right now," he announced. "But the boss wants you saved for him. He's got a few scores to even up. And he's got Injun blood, you know. He figgers to have a right nice time with you. You look sort of strong and had ought to be slow at dyin'."

Hatfield said nothing, but his mind was working at racing speed. He realized that he was in about the tightest spot he had ever been in his life. Only his wits could save him. His eyes centered on Gulden's face. He noted that on one side his beard grew sparsely, barely covering a broad, livid scar. He recognized the man then, despite the whiskers he had grown since leaving the Brazos.

"So you didn't get killed up on the Canadian," he remarked.

Gulden's eyes narrowed, then he chuckled.

"I was too smart for 'em," he boasted.

"Moro was smart, too," Hatfield pursued, "and a good swimmer."

Gulden scowled. "So you know that, too, eh?" he growled. "Well, it don't matter what you know—not any more."

"Yes, Moro was smart," Hatfield went on, talking in an effort to distract his cap-

tors' attention, and possibly throw them off guard. "Shavin' his whiskers and callin' himself Ramon Bera, sheep rancher, was smart, too."

This time Gulden grinned. "Uh-huh, he's smart, all right," he agreed. "Smart enough to hogtie the famous Lone Wolf, anyhow."

Hatfield was forced, uncomfortably, to agree there was considerable truth in that.

"But you can talk it all over with him tomorrow night," Gulden said cheerfully. "He'll be here. We got a little chore on hand tomorrow night, but he'll be here later."

Hatfield tried another tack.

"What's the chore?" he asked. "Lifting Bull Lawson's shipping herd?"

Gulden started, and scowled. But the question did not have the effect Hatfield hoped for. It caused Gulden suddenly to become wary.

"Enough of this palaver," he growled. "Get up and walk through that door over there."

Hatfield obeyed. Walking through the door indicated, he found himself in an inner room with a single small window stoutly barred with iron. Behind him the door banged shut. He heard a turned key grate in the lock.

THERE was a bunk in the room, built against the far wall. Hatfield sat down on the bunk and rolled a cigarette. He suffered no illusions as to what was in store for him if he did not somehow manage to escape from his prison. And from all present indications, escape appeared highly improbable.

The cabin was built of heavy logs and floored with thick planks. The door was solidly constructed. And in the outer room were two armed men. Still he apparently had twenty-four hours, at least, of grace, and in twenty-four hours lots of things could happen.

He pondered the chance of John Holly and the Tumbling H hands coming to look for him, but dismissed the possibility as negligible. He had told Holly that he might be away overnight, or even longer. Before Holly would get worried about his continued absence, his fate would in all probability be settled one way or another.

Hatfield could hear the two men moving about in the outer room. There was a rattling of cooking utensils. Soon the fragrance of frying bacon and boiling coffee seeped through the cracks. A little later Gulden raised his voice in a shout.

"Get back against the far wall and stay there!" he ordered. "We might as well feed you. Want to keep you in good shape for the boss. A strong, well-fed jigger takes longer to die."

Hatfield gritted his teeth at the unpleasant reference, but he obeyed orders. He knew well that nothing would please Gulden better than an excuse to shoot him.

The key grated, the door opened a crack. A plate of food and a cup of coffee were thrust into the room. The door closed, the key turned.

Hatfield was hungry and ate the food with appetite. Then he moved close to the door and stood listening.

The two owlhoots ate in silence, but when they had finished their meal, they began to talk.

"I'll be ridin' now," he heard a voice he recognized as Gulden's say. "But you'd ought to have company before long. Whitey and Pierce are due back from New Mexico any minute. Chances are I'll meet 'em on the way out. The boss figgered they should get in last night, but I reckon they got held up on the deal for the herd. They'll be packin' along the *dinero* they got for Vane's cows. Put it with the other stuff in the cache under the floor. There'll be a dividin' up after we get rid of Lawson's herd."

"About time," grunted the other. "I'm nigh busted now."

"You'll always be busted, the way you play poker," Gulden snorted. "You'd do better to stick to likker and women and leave cards alone. Well, so long. Keep a close watch on that hellion and don't open the door while you're here alone. He's bad medicine. Feed him tomorrow after Pierce and Whitey show up."

Hatfield heard him stamp out and bang the door behind him. In a few minutes hoofs clicked away toward the end wall of the gorge.

In the dying light, Hatfield carefully examined his prison. He tugged at the window bars, but they were thick and solidly imbedded in the wood. Not even his strength could budge them. He turned his attention to the door. But he saw at once that breaking it down was out of the

question, even if he had something to use for a battering ram, and any undue noise would instantly put the guard in the outer room on the alert.

Then suddenly he noted something that caused his heart to beat fast with revived hope.

The door was secured to the jamb by two iron strap hinges, each held in place by three large-headed screws. And the wood of the jamb was rotten and worm eaten. It might be possible to remove the screws, if he only could find something that would serve as a screw-driver.

But aside from the wooden bunk, the room was empty. His knife had been taken from him, and the coins in his pocket. His belt buckle was too thick. But as his fingers touched the buckle, he uttered an exclamation under his breath and drew out his Ranger badge. The silver plating was backed with steel. Breathing fast with excitement, he fitted the curve of the circle into the slot of the screw head.

"I believe it will work!" he thought. "Now if that sidewinder out there will just go to sleep. Chances are he will. He'll have a long wait for Pierce and Whitey to come back from New Mexico, unless Resurrection Day busts loose pronto."

HE COULD hear the owlhoot moving about in the other room, grumbling to himself as he washed and put away the dishes. Afterward a chair rattled and the smell of tobacco smoke drifted through the cracks. Finally the chair moved as the man stood up. A little later a bunk creaked as he stretched out on it.

For a long time Hatfield sat silent and waiting. He did not dare begin work until he was positive the owlhoot was asleep. After a nerve-wracking period of suspense, the sound of snoring drifted from the outer room. Hatfield softly crossed to the door and went to work on the hinges.

Light seeped under the door, but the inner room was pitch black. Hatfield could locate the screw heads only by touch.

The task proved harder than he had anticipated. It took every ounce of his strength to start the screws. But once they were started, despite the clumsiness of his tool, they came out of the wood readily enough.

It was slow work, however. Hatfield's fingers were sore and bloody, he was wet with sweat, and shaking with strain before the last screw yielded to the leverage of the bent and battered badge. For some minutes he leaned against the door to catch his breath. Then he took hold of the loosened hinges and tugged gently.

The door creaked, the bolt ground in its slot. Hatfield held his breath and listened. The guard continued to snore.

Slowly, carefully, Hatfield eased the door away from the jamb. Finally he was able to get his fingers through the crack and grasp the edge of the door. With a mighty jerk he tore it free and hurled it crashing to the floor. He bounded through the opening and across the room as the guard shot erect with a startled yell, grabbing for his gun.

Hatfield lunged for the weapon and caught the man's wrist. With all his strength he twisted the arm up and back.

The gun exploded with a roar, the powder flame searing Hatfield's face. But the bullet thudded harmlessly into the ceiling. The guard howled with pain as Hatfield wrenched his arm. The six clattered to the floor.

The owlhoot was a big man and powerful. He tore his wrist free and struck the Ranger a blow that sent him reeling back. With a bellow of rage the owlhoot rushed to follow up his advantage. Hatfield ducked under his reaching hands, seized him about his thighs and hurled him over his shoulder.

Through the air he flew, arms and legs revolving. His head hit the log wall with a sodden crunch. He flopped to the floor. For a moment his boot heels beat a spasmodic tattoo on the boards, then were still. He lay motionless, his head twisted around at a grotesque angle, his eyes fixed in their sockets.

"Busted his neck," the Lone Wolf panted, breathing in great gasps. "Well, I reckon that settles that."

His first move was to retrieve his gunbelts from where Gulden had hung them on the nail. He buckled them on, made sure his Colts were loaded.

There was coffee, still warm, in the pot on the stove. Hatfield downed two cups and felt much better. Then he began to go over the cabin systematically. At length he discovered a floor board that appeared loose. He managed to pry it up to reveal a lined compartment. In this compartment

were several stout canvas sacks. The sacks contained money in gold and bills.

Hatfield did not take the trouble to count it. He replaced the board after a brief examination of the contents.

"Can't bother with it now," he decided. "Take care of it later. Right now I have more important things to do."

He left the cabin with its grisly occupant, closing the door behind him, and hurried to his waiting horse. Goldy greeted him with a disgusted snort. He mounted and rode swiftly down the canyon.

IT WAS still dark when Hatfield reached the Tumbling H headquarters. He quietly stabled the sorrel and repaired to the ranchhouse, where he slept, the bunkhouse being crowded at the moment. He knew the room old John occupied and tapped lightly on the door until he got a muffled invitation to enter.

Holly swore with wrath and astonishment when the Ranger regaled him with an account of the happenings in the hideout canyon.

"I want you to take Adams and a couple of your hands and ride to the Bradded L," Hatfield concluded. "Line Lawson up on what to do. You know where his herd is pastured? Good. What's the lay of the land there."

"They're bunched on his southwest pasture," Holly said. "It's a brush pasture with clumps of thicket standin' around. There's a thick growth on the north and east, thinner on the west. To the south, where a crick runs, it's open country."

"I see," Hatfield remarked thoughtfully. "Lawson guards his herd, of course?"

"That's right," said Holly. "He told me he has three night hawks on the job all the time."

"Wouldn't do him any good," Hatfield commented. "Would just get the three cashed in. That bunch is plumb snake-blooded. Tell him to fix up three dummies from straw and overalls and tie them to the backs of trained horses that can be depended on to amble around the herd by themselves. Tell him to have his men ready for business. I'll be there to handle things. His men and your four should be plenty to take care of the chore."

"When will you be along?" Holly asked eagerly.

"I won't dare leave here till late evening," said Hatfield. "I'll stay holed up all day. If the horned toads happen to be keeping a watch on the canyon and should spot me, they'd call the whole thing off and, the chances are, take it on the run."

"All right," said Holly. "I'll tell Doris to look after you. I'll head for Lawson's place right after breakfast."

"That'll do the trick," Hatfield said. "You won't attract any attention even if they spot you. I'll be seeing you. Now I figure to knock off a mite of shut-eye."

CHAPTER XV

Pay-off

BEFORE sunset, Hatfield left the canyon. Following the directions outlined by Holly, he reached the Bradded L shortly after dark. He found the hands assembled in the ranchhouse, grimly ready for business.

"I always hate to mix up in trouble," remarked Bull Lawson, licking his lips with anticipation, "but I'm sort of in favor of this shindig. Do you figure those sidewinders will put up a fight, Hatfield?"

"I'd say it's likely," the Lone Wolf told him. "We are law officers and will have to give them a chance to surrender, but I doubt if they'll take it. If things do start, shoot fast and shoot straight. It's a bad bunch."

Bull Lawson's mouth stretched in a grin of delight. His punchers were staring, almost in awe, at the man whose exploits were almost legendary in the Southwest.

The Lone Wolf! Gentlemen, hush!

"Let's go," Hatfield said, rising to his feet.

At the pasture, Hatfield staticned his men with care.

"Holly, your hands over to the left," he ordered. "Lawson, and his, to the right where the thicket curves. That will put the devils between a crossfire. I figure they'll come from the west."

The dispositions were quickly made. To John Holly was entrusted a huge heap of oil-drenched straw and brush.

"Now there's nothing to do but wait," said Hatfield. "It won't be long. They

should make their try before midnight. They'll want the dark hours to get across the rangeland and out onto the desert."

But the wait was tedious enough for nerves tensed for action. The night was black dark. The sleeping herd was a formless mass. The slowly pacing horses with the straw dummies roped to their hulls were vague shadows in the wan starlight.

What seemed a long time passed. Then a small sound broke the silence, the sound of stealthy movement in the thinner brush to the west. Another moment and the night seemed to explode with gunfire. The straw dummies twitched and jerked as bullets hammered them. The cattle came to their feet with terrified bellows.

Out of the brush streamed nearly a dozen horsemen, shooting and yelling.

Jim Hatfield's voice rang out in tones of thunder:

"In the name of the State of Texas! You are under arrest!"

Even as the raiders whirled with startled yelps, a tiny light flickered in the brush, was instantly followed by a sheet of flame that roared upward, making the scene bright as day.

The owlhoots fired wildly in the direction of Hatfield's voice. The Lone Wolf's Colts let go with a rattling crash. The grim-faced cowboys fired as fast as they could pull trigger.

Caught in that murderous cross-fire, the outlaws never had a chance. Half of their number went down at the first volley. Almost instantly two more spun from their saddles. Those left alive flung down their arms and howled for mercy.

"Hold it!" Hatfield shouted to his men.

He strode forward, grim and purposeful, the star of the Rangers gleaming on his broad breast. His head jerked sideward as a crashing sounded in the brush to the west, and the beat of speeding hoofs.

"One got away!" he growled. "Look those bodies over and see if one is Bera. He isn't among the living ones."

"Not here," Bull Lawson bellowed a moment later. "The blasted lobo was waitin' back in the brush and hightailed! And there's no trailin' him in this dark."

Hatfield acted instantly. "Take charge of things, Lawson," he directed. "Run the prisoners to town and turn them over to the sheriff. I think I know where Bera will head. He'll make a try for the money cached in the hole-up cabin before he pulls out. I'll bet on that. See you later."

He raced to where his horse waited, flung himself into the saddle. His voice rang out:

"Trail, Goldy, trail!"

THE great sorrel shot forward, his hoofs drumming the ground. Hatfield gathered up the reins and settled himself for a grueling ride.

"Thirty miles and a little more to go," he muttered. "And I figure Bera, taking the short way to the head of the hole-up canyon, won't have much more than twenty to cover. If he just doesn't figure out what I'm doing! Maybe he won't and won't try to make top speed. Then I'll have a chance."

On and on sped the golden horse. He covered the nearly twenty miles to Lighthouse Canyon hardly slackening speed. In the canyon, Hatfield allowed him to drink from the waters of the stream and gave him a good rub-down and ten minutes' rest. Then he sent him charging up the canyon.

With the great clock in the sky wheeling westward Goldy sped on, his nostrils flaring, his glorious black mane tossing in the wind of his passing. Hatfield encouraged him with voice and hand.

With the plainsman's unerring instinct for distance and direction, Hatfield sensed when they reached the side canyon. He turned Goldy into it and slackened his pace a trifle. The smell of dawn was in the air and by the time he was within a quarter of a mile of the cabin, the east was graying.

Hatfield slowed Goldy still more. The sorrel was blowing hard, his bright coat was dark with sweat, flecked with foam, but as yet he showed no signs of real exhaustion. Another five minutes and Hatfield pulled him to a halt.

"Take it easy, feller," he said, as he slid to the ground. "I'll do the rest on foot."

He glided forward, peering and listening. When he reached the point where the growth thinned he uttered a low, exultant exclamation. A light glowed in the cabin. Loosening his guns in their sheaths, he sped toward the building.

Inside the cabin, Ramon Bera stood beside the table, tightening the pucker strings of the canvas bags of money. His

head flung up as the door crashed open to reveal the tall form of the Lone Wolf lawman.

"Elevate!" Hatfield shouted.

But Bera wasn't done yet. He moved with the speed of light, hurling himself sideward, sweeping the lamp crashing from the table in the same move. Darkness blanketed the cabin. Darkness through which spurted lances of flame.

WEAVING, ducking, Hatfield fired with both hands.

He felt the wind of passing bullets, heard them thud into the logs. One seared a hot weal along his ribs.

Then suddenly through the roaring dark sounded a choking cry followed by the thud of a falling body. Hatfield realized that those deadly flashes were no longer blazing in his direction. He stood tense and listening, his thumbs hooked over the hammers of his gun.

No sound came from across the cabin. He waited another moment, holstered one gun and fumbled a match from his pocket. Holding it at arm's length, he scratched it on the wall.

The tiny flicker revealed Ramon Bera lying face down beside the overturned table.

Hatfield flipped out the match and instantly changed position. Nothing happened. He struck a second match and walked across the room to where Bera lay. He holstered his second gun as the match flickered out.

Bera was dead.

By the light of another match, Hatfield located the lamp. The chimney was shattered to fragments, but the metal bowl was intact.

He turned up the wick and touched the match to it. By the wavering flame and the strengthening light of the dawn, he gave things a once-over. Then he went outside and located Bera's horse. He loaded it with sacks of money.

With a last glance at the dead outlaw, he left the cabin.

"I'll turn this *dinero* over to the sheriff," he decided cheerfully. "He can have the chore of figuring out just who it properly belongs to."

As he plodded toward where he had left his mount, he added:

"Well, I reckon this about cleans things up. As for me, what I want to do most is sleep solid for a week."

Mounting Goldy, he rode slowly down the canyon.

HOWEVER, Hatfield did not sleep for a week, although at the moment he felt as if he could. Morning of the day following found him standing on the rim of Lighthouse Canyon, Goldy's bridle looped over his arm. Beside him stood Doris Holly.

"Yes, I'll have to be riding now," he told her. "My work here is finished and Captain Bill will have another little chore lined up for me by the time I get back to the post. But I'll be seeing you."

"Then you will ride this way sometime again?" she asked.

Hatfield smiled down at her.

"A Ranger rides a long trail," he replied, "but there's never a trail so long it doesn't have a turning. And sometimes it runs right back to where it began. So we won't say *'adios.'* Instead, we'll just make it *'hasta luego.'* "

She watched him ride away, tall and graceful atop his great golden horse, to where duty called and new adventure waited.

Not *'adios'*—good-bye," she murmured softly. "Just *'hasta luego'*—until we meet again."

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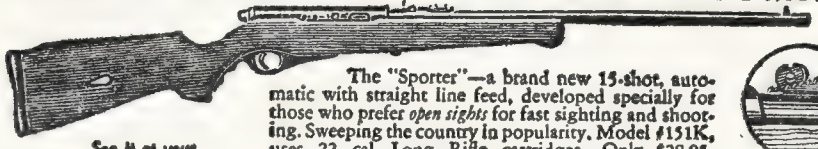

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HOT SADDLE RING

By CLAY STARR

When it comes to catching rustlers, sometimes too much range savvy can make it look bad—for the wrong man!

OLD Man Jim Trask and me are riding the lower reaches of the Bear Claw Range when we run onto some maverick-sign. We're both straddling leggy bays carrying the J T connected iron, which is merely a cross bar over the top of the J. I've been riding for the Old Man going onto twenty years, give or take one either way, and most times I wrangle the cavvy, which means, of course, that I am in charge of the band of saddle-stock.

Beef roundup has been over a month behind us, and old Jim has him an idea that we missed a few strays in the big gather. We come to a little park in the brush where some waddy had made a chip-fire recent. It ain't big enough for a camper, and too big for a cooking fire like the greasy-sackers use. A greasy-sacker being a long-riding cowhand who packs his cooking gear in a gunny-sack in case he can't make it in to the headquarters ranch.

The Old Man sets his saddle and casts his eyes along the ground to read sign. His bushy eyebrows screw up to move his hat back an inch where they touch the brim, and I can see that old Jim is some puzzled.

"What you make of this, Jingler?" he asks me curious. "I can't find no trace of a stamp-iron!"

Graze-country reads like an open book to the men who earn their forty-a-month-and-found in the saddle. A bent twig for direction, hoof-prints for the size of the critter which has passed that way, droppings here and there to tell time by; it's all as clear as print on a newspaper. But like some newspapers, sometimes the print gets smudged a few.

"A lone waddy, straddling a long-legged sorrel," I start reading out loud. "He was here yesterday, and he branded a long yearling, seems as though."

"Yeah," old Jim agrees. "You reckon he used a running-iron to do his chores?"

This is all as plain as the nose on your face, on account of all who ride can read the sign in that part of Montana. If the cowhand had used a stamp-iron, we'd have seen where the handle had rested on the ground near the fire. Like as not we'd have seen the brand where the feller tried out the iron a time or two to clean off any burnt chips. Chances are there'd have been some sign if he'd used a running iron, which was forbidden by law, and by common agreement among the cattlemen.

"Mebbe he treated the critter for screw-worms," I tell the Old Man.

WE CAN see where a cow-critter had been roped and hog-tied, and several places where the short horns of a long yearling had left their prints.

"Nuh uh," old Jim contradicts. "There'd be some medicine-sign if he had doctored the critter, and on top of that, screw-worms most often follow branding in the spring. Leave us read the fine print and see can we come up with the joker in this deck."

There ain't much difference in our ages. The Old Man is just turned sixty, and I saw the light of day a year before he did. The Old Man still has most of his own teeth, and while my choppers is bought and paid for, I have to be some careful when I sneeze sudden.

"He's a straw-chewer," I tell old Jim

Red fired and one of the rustlers reeled back in the saddle

slowly. "He's right handed on account of he wears his hardware on that side. You can see where he rolled some when he tried to flank down that yearling."

"Yeah, and he's tall for size," old Jim adds, as he measures the length of this waddy's stride. "And by dogies, he's got red hair!"

Old Jim points to a spindly sapling where the cowboy's hat had rubbed off when he was rassling the yearling. I leaned down and found something else.

"He's wearing a Santy Annie Stetson with a bound brim. I reckon who could that be?"

We both screw up our eyes to think better, casting about in our minds for a tall red-head, right-handed, riding a leggy sorrel, and wearing a Santy Ann Stetson with a bound brim.

"Must be a Pilgrim," old Jim says finally. "Or some saddle-tramp who drifted up here from Californy."

"In which case he'd be straddling a center-fire rig," I add thoughtfully. "He ought to be plumb easy to find any time we want him."

"Don't know as we want him," the Old Man murmured. "Except that we're less than half a day from the J T bunk-house, and I'm some curious. Let's get on with our work and see about that calf-tally we started out for to make."

What we're really doing is estimating the calf crop, and old Jim figures it will run about sixty-five percent. Which is average-middling on open range, and when winters are mild, sometimes it goes as high as seventy.

We ride a wide circle which will bring us out of the foothills above the J T ranch and bunk-house. Some of the crew are putting up prairie hay for winter feed as we ride through the creek bottom, and they are young enough not to be grousing about not doing all their work from the saddle.

Colt Watkins rides the rough string for the J T connected, and he's turning a bronc into the holding pen after riding the horse for the fourth time. Two more go-arounds, and that horse will be broke for riding, and then the regular hands will finish breaking it for cow-work.

Colt looks up and waves a hand as we dismount to off-saddle. He's a tall, handsome feller of twenty-four or five, and he draws a tophand's pay from old Jim. Colt gets fifty a month and found, and spends it for fine raiment and riotous living.

"Evening, Jingler," he greets me cordial. "Howdy, old Jim!"

The Old Man looks suspicious. He knows that Colt is leading up to something he wants, or he wouldn't be going out of his way that close to supper to polish the apple.

"No!" old Jim says flatly. "No more money till pay-day!"

COLT WATKINS looks hurt, but he grins sheepish. "I'm something I wouldn't leave no one else call me," he murmurs. "I never said a word except to pass the time of day, and the Old Man reads my mind like one of them palm-readers in Butte!

"Shucks, boss," he says in a wheedling manner. "They's a dance tomorrow night on the Circle W, and all I wanted was a leetle advance to get me a shine, shave, and shampoo!"

"Can do," old Jim agrees, and he winks at me. "Two dollars ought to cover all that," and he hands Colt two silver cartwheels.

"She's coming on winter, boss," Watkins says thoughtfully. "Time of year when a man just might get him a bad cold. Two bucks won't leave anything for cough syrup, and then a man never knows when he might get bit by a snake!"

"I'll make it two more," old Jim compromises. "You can't get very drunk on two dollars, and you've got plenty of work to do in this here breaking tank," and he kicks in with two more silver dollars.

"Which my face is good at the Boots-and-Saddles bar and grill," Watkins states doggedly. "Can I help it if I'm young, stout, and full of spirits?"

"Mebbe not, but I can," old Jim answers bluntly. "You go getting the calabozo wrapped around you in town, I aim to let you sweat it out. You heard me, bronc-stomper!"

"Simon Legree," Watkins mutters under his breath. "Slavery, no less!"

"Says which?" old Jim barks sternly.

"Third degree, I said," Watkins tells old Jim. "I said I've had a good time for less!"

"Some folks would rather bend a lie all out of shape for credit, than tell the truth for cash," the Old Man answers scathingly. "I heard you the first time." He tugged on his cowhorn mustaches, and handed Colt a five-dollar note. "Keep yore eyes peeled while you're in town," he tells Watkins. "For a tall young redhead who wears a Santy Annie hat with a bound brim. Find out who he is, and what iron

he rides for."

"Thanks for the expense money, boss," Watkins murmurs with a grin, and old Jim frowns. Now he can't take that five bucks out of Colt's pay, and he knows he's been took again.

"That gives you all day Sunday to sober up," he warns Watkins. "If they's anything I despise and can't tolerate none whatever, she's a drunk man when I'm cold sober. Keep yore hoss well shod behind," he tells Colt, and drifts on over to the big house.

Colt grins and tucks the five down in his watch pocket. Then he stops and stares at old Jim's straight back.

"You reckon what did he mean by that?" he asks me curiously.

"Must have something to do with a cutting hoss," I volunteer. "When you are teaching a bronc to slide, you keep him barefoot in front, and you even rasp the frog down some to make him tenderfooted. Then you put heavy shoes on behind so's he will slide."

"I know how to shoe a cutting hoss," Watkins flares up. "What in Tophet has that got to do with a tall, redheaded Pilgrim who sashays around in a Santy Annie J. B.?"

"It's costing the old man five dollars to find out," I remind Watkins. "So you get the answer before you start swilling Panther sweat, and dancing with the pretty fillies!"

EARLY Saturday afternoon Colt Watkins gears his top horse and hits out for town. He's riding fully-dressed, even if he will have to check his hardware at the Circle W dance. Old Tom Wise is smart both by name and by nature, and he knows cowboys who look through the bottom of a glass too often. Not that a cowboy is quarrelsome, you understand, but the younger ones never do get enough fight. What with the men outnumbering the gals four-to-one, there's bound to be some rivalry.

"You better gear your town hoss and tail along to bring up the drag," the Old Man tells me after supper. "Colt Watkins was too hard to raise up this far to risk losing him now, with the new saddle-stock only half-broke. And keep an eye peeled for that tall redhead!"

I see the Old Man is some worried, so I throw my old hen-skin on a slim-legged gelding which is part Arabian. In my younger days, I never was much for a pretty horse, but I sure enough was for a stout one.

It figures that Colt Watkins might need a guiding hand after several cups of Ma Wise's punch, which old Tom always and invariably spikes with a quart or two of Rocky Mountain Dew. Not counting the likker most of the boys will be packing down the leg of one boot.

I tie up at the Circle W rack along about eight. I can hear the music inside the big house. Sam Burke is fiddling a square-dance, with Jode Simmons playing the geetar. A good-looking young waddy is manipulating one of them new squeeze organs, and doing quite a chore. But it's the caller who attracts my interest as I take a glass of punch from Ma Wise.

He's a tall, handsome redhead wearing tailored britches, and a red-and-white checked rodeo shirt. The legs of his new pants are tucked down in knee-high, hand-made cowboy boots which must have set him back a month's pay. On his curly red head he's wearing a new Santy Annie Stetson with a bound brim, and he's calling the dance to a fare-thee-well.

> Dance with the gal who looks so sweet,
> Dance with the gal with the great big feet.
> Possum in the woodpile, kicking up a fuss,
> Old Blue caught him, and he made quite a muss!

The boy can sure call the doe-si-does, and no mistake. He ain't packing a belt-gun, but he is wearing a half-breed holster belted high on the right side. He's got the dancers circling wide and coming down through the middle, underneath the apple tree, and over the hill to Gramma's.

The girls all love it, and the boys are having a hog-killing time. All except Colt Watkins, who is standing along the wall glaring at the caller. You know without being told that the stranger's front handle is bound to be "Red" to his friends, and he don't seem to have an enemy excepting mebbe Colt Watkins, who always uses his shadow for a looking-glass when out riding the range.

Not only that, but Watkins fancies himself as a caller at the square dances. As the music finally stops, Watkins stalks up to Red and smiles coldly.

"I'll spell you this go-around, Red," he offers, but it's more of a demand than a request. Then Colt sees me and introduces the handsome young caller.

"Jingler, make you used to Red Rogle who allows he's starting a shoe-string outfit which he calls the Lazy J R. Red, meet yore betters, Jingler Carson!"

"Howdy, Red," I greet the cowboy. "You done a right smart chore of calling that last hoe-down!"

"Well, thanks, Jingler," Rogle says, as he shakes my hand. I get quite a surprise. The redhead has a grip of steel, and bright blue eyes. "Wait till you hear me sound off on the last go-down," he adds with a smile.

HE NODS at Watkins and hustles across the room where Janet Wise is surrounded by a group of perspiring cowboys. Janet is old Tom's only chick, and the prettiest filly in Montana. She greets Red with a happy smile, and extends both hands to him.

"I'm glad you asked Colt to call this dance," she tells him. "I was afraid you had forgotten that you had asked me for this dance."

"I couldn't forget," Red answers tenderly, and he smiles down into her brown eyes. "But I'm afraid Colt won't like it when he finds out that this dance is a waltz. I fixed it with the boys in the orchestra!"

The boys in the hoe-down orchestra grin at each other. Jode Simmons was twanging a geetar, while Sam Burke carried the lead on an Arkansas fiddle. Both are Circle W waddies who manage to get out of a lot of hard work because of their musical abilities.

Jode Simmons is tall and lanky, and not much for looks. He's mebbe so twenty-eight, and had been with old Tom Wise for about two years.

"Red and Colt Watkins is due to tangle spurs," he remarks to Sam Burke with a wide grin. "I'll put my dinero on Colt to win in a walk!"

Sam Burke is shorter than his pard, but wider through the shoulders. He wears a black mustache. He can scrape cat-gut with the best of the fiddlers, and he's an all around cowhand to boot. Him and Simmons has been saddle-pards ever since they rode in together and hit old man Tom Wise up for a riding job. I've heard them talk some about riding back to Idaho to start a shoe-string spread of their own.

"Yeah, I'll string along with Colt Watkins," Burke answers his pard. "He'll tie it onto that redhead the first chance he gets, you see if he don't!"

I think this over as I watch Red Rogle smiling at Janet Wise. You can tell by looking at him that he's a fast thinker on his feet. If he's been drinking any, it doesn't show, and he grins as he watches Colt Watkins talk to Simmons and Burke.

Those two cow-camp musicians grin at each other, and say something to Watkins I can't hear, but Watkins evidently don't like what he hears. Before he can start anything, Burke counts up to four, and busts out into a waltz. Red Rogle circles Janet's slim waist with his right arm as the music begins.

Men and boys, how that tall redhead can dance! Janet and him floats across the floor like a couple of feathers. Janet has her eyes closed like the fillies always do when they are happy—and in the arms of some feller they like better than average.

But Colt Watkins now. That bronc-stomper is fit to be tied, and no hoggin'-string handy. He's all set to call a rousing hoe-down to give Red Rogle competition, but Red has done stacked the deck against him. Colt also likes Janet Wise pretty good, but Janet has always been impartial to all the riding hands. That is, until Red Rogle comes along to throw his hat into the ring, and it seems like this is the third dance he's called on the neighborhood ranches.

WATKINS walks over to where I'm standing near the punch-bowl, and he's walking stiff-legged like a dog on the fight. He takes a cup of punch, downs it at one gulp, and holds out his cup again. Ma Wise frowns a little, but she deals him another one light.

"Careful, Colt," she warns him in a whisper. "Tom spiked this punch when he thought I wasn't looking. Red dances divinely, doesn't he? I'll bet he paid Jode Simmons and Sam Burke to play that waltz, on account of those two are always looking for extra money!"

"Rogle ain't such a much," Colt growls. "How many head of stock is he running?"

"Just a foundation herd right now," Ma Wise answers stiffly, on account of she can see that Colt is jealous. "He's just got two hundred head now, but he bought five sections of land joining our north boundary. He wants to learn all about the cow-business, and Tom says he catches on fast."

"He looks like a Fancy-Charley to me," Watkins growls. "I was all set to call a hoe-down which is a hoe-down, but he already had it fixed with that gut-scraper to play him a waltz!"

"Mend your manners!" I whisper to Colt. "You mean the fiddler, don't you?"

"I'm sorry, and I reckon I'll be riding back to the JT connected," Watkins tells Ma Wise. "Can I have another drink for the road?"

"Must you go so soon?" Ma Wise asks half-heartedly. "We're serving breakfast at six!"

Colt takes another look at Red Rogle and shakes his head. "I wouldn't have no appetite," he answers stiffly. "Bear my regards to your daughter, and tell her I had to see a dog about a man!"

With that he downs his drink and high-heels it across the room. He picks up his six-shooter from old Tom Wise, who had been watching, and has read all the sign. Old Tom does not argue or urge Colt to stay, knowing there'd be a fight between Red and Colt.

The music stops just then, and Red Rogle and Janet stop at the door near Colt Watkins. They walk outside for a breath of air, and there's Colt waiting with a scowl on his face.

"You following me?" he asks Red.

"Nuh uh," Red answers with a grin. "What put you on the prod, cowboy?"

Janet whirled on a high heel and walked back into the house. Without any warning, Colt Watkins swings one for Red's chin. It never landed. Red blocked the punch with his left, and stepped in behind a solid straight right arm. His fist landed flush on Red's jaw, and I'm a Gentle Annie if Colt didn't sag face-forward. Red caught him, lowered Colt to the ground to break his fall, whirled on his heel, and overtook Janet at the punch-bowl. He was smiling as if nothing had happened.

I shagged over to Colt and shook him by a shoulder. He's out cold. I hook a hand in his vest and drag him into the shadows. It was five minutes before Colt roused around, and he made no protest when I led him to his horse and boosted him to the saddle.

COLT WATKINS is something of a cow-camp psychologist. He got on my blind side by asking me to help him rope and snub down a blue-roan he's fixing to ride in the breaking pen. When he topped off that snake-eye, he made a glory-ride from here to who hid the broom. He shows his hole-card after the ride, while him and me are round-siding behind the tack-shed.

"You need some help to round up the young saddle-stock, Jingler," he breaks it to me seriously. "Don't seem right for a tophand of your years to be a-working so hard by your lonesome. The Old Man will give the go-ahead if you just drop him a hint."

This sudden concern for my health and infirmities makes me some suspicious. Then I see Colt drawing a brand in the dirt with a broken straw. He's making a Lazy JR connected, and studying the results with a jaundiced eye.

"Quit clouding the sign," I growl at him.

"I want to get out there and read sign on this budding cattle-baron," Colt admits honestly. "Like he said it when he was calling that square-dance Saturday night on the Circle W. 'There's a possum in the wood-pile, a-kicking up a fuss'!"

I always was a sucker for anything that had to do with reading sign, so I speak to Old Man Jim about some temporary help. He nods careless, and an hour later Colt and me quit the ranch, and hit out for the low foot-hills.

Colt had heard me talking about finding the chip-fire in that little park while riding with the Old Man to make a calf-tally. He heads for the place like a homing pigeon, but before we reach the clearing, Colt stops his horse sudden. He points to a long yearling which is carrying the new Lazy JR connected brand. An old cow is grazing nearby, and I recognize her at once.

"Jingler," Colt says to me slow-like, "they is a diseased rodent in Denmark. That yearling belongs to old Crumpled-horn yonder, and I remember of branding and altering that yearling my ownself. It's tallied in the J T brand-book, and now what do you see, if your old eyes don't

deceive you?"

"Look, feller," I tell him caustic. "Pick the bean from your own eye before you try to cast the mote from mine. They ain't nothing wrong with my vision, you salty hairpin!"

"Lay your hackles, Jingler," Watkins answers soothing. "I'm trying to break it to you gentle that they's rustlers working on the JT range. That brand has been worked over from a JT to a Lazy JR connected, and all we have to do is to find a tall, red-headed jasper who's more than likely right-handed. We'll find a running-iron in his saddle-bags, or I'll walk through glass in my bare feets!"

He raises his head sudden and keens the wind. Now I can hear a cow bellering, and after we place the sound, Colt and me takes off at a high lope. The noise is coming from a buffalo-wallow left over from the old Indian days, and we rein down to a walk. Colt loosens his six-shooter so it won't hang in the leather, and gestures with his head for me to fan out to one side. That way we thin the target we make, in case of war.

We ride into the wallow, not making any noise on the bunch-grass. A tall waddy is bending down over a weaner-calf near the embers of a little chip fire. He's getting ready to pull the piggin' string when Colt Watkins yells for him to leave the critter tied up.

Red Rogle jumps to his feet, with his left hand slapping down for his cutter. Then he sees the cocked six-shooter in Colt's right hand, and changes his mind rapid.

"I just now found this calf here," Red says hesitantly. "I rode in to find out what was going on, and it looks to me like some one is out to frame me!"

"Hold it so, Red," Colt warns quietly. "Climb down and take a look-see, Jingler," he tells me. "If this rustler so much as bats an eye, I'll salivate him through the middle!"

I DISMOUNT and walk over to Red's leggy sorrel. He's carrying a pair of saddle-bags behind the cantle, but I don't find a running-iron. I do find a new stamp-iron bearing the Lazy JR connected, but it's colder than a loan-shark's heart.

"He's clean," I tell Watkins. "Looks like we made a mistake!"

"Mistake, my eye!" Colt snaps. "Look there by the fire, Jingler. If that ain't a saddle-ring and a pair of pliers to hold same while venting a brand, I hope I never see the back of my neck!"

Sure enough there's a hot saddle-ring on the ground near the fire. Red Rogle sees it at the same time, and his jaw drops with surprise.

"So you're an artist among other things," Watkins says sarcastic. "You heat up the saddle-ring, holding it with the pliers. Then you take Old Man Jim Trask's JT connected, add a loop and a line, and your foundation herd begins to grow like magic. It makes a Lazy J R connected, and you add another one in your tally-book!"

Red Rogle stares, and nods his head. It's plain to see he can read sign with a little help, and his broad shoulders begin to droop.

"I never altered that brand," he whispered hoarsely. "You fellers have got to believe me. I bought five sections of land, and two hundred head of she-stuff with the money my mother left me. I wanted to learn the cow business, so I started out small!"

"But you're growing fast," Colt says quietly, and then he changes. "Tell it to the sheriff!" he barks. "Take his hardware before he gets rash, Jingler," he tells me. "He goes letting on to get brave, it's always open season on rustlers!"

Red Rogle makes no resistance when I empty his holster. He's packing a .38 on a .45 frame, and I slip the weapon down in the band of my pants. Then I climb my saddle while Colt holds the drop, after which he tells Red to ride on out and point east.

Sheriff Clint Hadley handles all the details of booking Rogle when we turn our rustler over to the law at the county jail. We all look up when galloping hoofs sound from the west end of town, and a moment later old Tom Wise and his daughter Janet slide their Circle W horses to a stop at the rail. They both dismount a-running, with Janet bending the lead for the sheriff's office.

"What's the bail?" old Tom shouts, before he's inside. "I'll go as high as twenty thousand!"

"Five thousand will do," the sheriff tells the old cattleman. "But I aimed to hold

him in jail until the trial!"

Janet walks up to Red and slips an arm around him. She glares at Colt Watkins who don't know what to say, so he don't say it. Sheriff Hadley finally breaks the silence which has us all bogged down.

"We'll ride out yonder," Hadley announced quietly, but we knew he was giving an order. "If you rannies haven't clouded the sign with your big feet, we might find out something!"

To make a bad spot even worse, old man Tom Wise says we'll stop at the Oriental's for grub before riding, it being high noon. Colt and me have about forty cents between us, and Janet offers to lend Colt two dollars until pay-day. Colt colors up like a gal with her first pair of shoes, so I come to his rescue.

"Give me the loan of the two bucks, Miss Janet," I ask her, and she passes me two cart-wheels.

As all hands eat their ham and eggs, with french fries on the side. Janet makes talk with Red Rogle. Neither of them look at Colt, who scowls at his plate. He gets up abrupt and walks out without waiting for his green apple pie.

COLT is sitting his saddle when we all come out to mount up. Sheriff Hadley tells Colt to bend the lead, which makes him and me ride in front of the rest. Old Tom Wise rides with the sheriff, leaving Janet and Red to bring up the drag. We can hear them talking like as if they were going to a picnic.

We reach the place where we found the hog-tied calf, and the hot saddle-ring. The sheriff gets down and grunts as he reads the sign. Red Rogle walks up to Sheriff Hadley and speaks earnestly.

"Look at that one set of prints, Sheriff. They lead over to the north-west where I bought my five sections. Let's ride over there and see if my stock is all right!"

"By dogies, Jingler! Colt Watkins whispers to me hoarsely. "The Pilgrim is right. Who ever roped that calf here, hit a high lope over toward the Circle W!"

Now it's Colt and Red who take the lead, whipping their ponies down the hind legs. The rest of us make it a race, and an hour later we're on Circle W range near a flowing spring that's fed from an underground stream. The horses are sweating from the long run, and now it's Red Rogle who does the talking.

"My Lazy JR herd was right here, Sheriff," he tells Hadley. "Looks to me like two riders drove that stock off toward the lavas!"

Sheriff Hadley turned to Colt Watkins. "How do you read it, cowboy?" he asked gravely.

Colt nodded his head. "That's reading sign," he agreed. 'What's the orders, Sheriff?"

"That's better," Hadley grunted. "You and Red ride ahead and make a wide circle. The rest of us will fan out and press on from back here. Mebbe so we can get them between us, and they might cave and surrender!"

Colt jerks his head at Red, and they ride off at a slow lope because the horses are some tired. I keep them in sight as I ride to the left, and after an hour, I hear the bellowing protest of tired cattle. I mend the pace and ride up to join Red and Colt just as twilight begins to cast long shadows over the Bear Claws.

"We're ahead of them," Colt Watkins says to Red. "Can you shoot that gun you're carrying?"

"Fair," Red answers modestly. "How about you?"

[*Turn page*]

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Colt scowls and then changes it to a grin. "I had that coming," he admitted honestly. "What are we waiting for?"

Now we're in the badlands where the going is slower. The cattle are quiet, and Colt reads the sign out loud.

"They're drinking in Wolf Creek, and the rustlers mean to bed them down for a while." He turned to glare at Red Rogle. "The sheriff wants them alive!" he reminded.

"Like you said," Red murmurs, and we ride on at a walk.

We are coming down a deer-trail through heavy brush which thins out suddenly into a little valley with quite a few cattle scattered around. We must have made more noise than we thought, because a six-shooter roared like thunder just as Red and Colt showed in the clear.

Colt Watkins jerked to the left and fell sprawling from his saddle. Red Rogle stayed on his horse facing two mounted men, who are playing for keeps. The tall redhead slaps for his six-shooter, makes a fast draw, but takes his time to squeeze off a slow shot.

One of the rustlers yells and rolls backward over his cantle. Red and the other rustler fire at the same time, and the second brand-blotter pitches to the ground with his smoking pistol spilling from his hand. Red quickly dismounts leaving his horse ground-hitcheel.

BY THIS time I'm ready for war, and Colt crawls from the brush with his gun eared back and ready to go. Red Rogle yells a warning before we can fire.

"Hold your fire! They are both disarmed!"

Colt Watkins gets to his feet, and his left arm is hanging limp at his side. Red Rogle has two bullet holes through his new Santy Annie Stetson. He grins at Colt and asks him if he's hurt bad.

"Through the left arm, up high," Colt mutters. "You emptied both them saddles at better than fifty yards!"

"Let's get over there," Red answers grimly. "Yonder comes old Tom and the sheriff!"

"And Janet," Colt added a bit sadly.

Janet Wise raced up to Red Rogle and jumped to the ground while her horse was still sliding. Her arms went around the tall redhead, and she searched his face.

"We heard shooting. Did you get hurt, Jack?" she asked Red jerkily.

Red Rogle smiled and kissed the girl full on the lips. "Not a scratch," he assured her. "But Colt got a nasty wound in the left arm. See what you can do for him, Honey."

Colt Watkins stared, and then tightened his lips. He had tied his bandanna around the upper part of his arm, and he shrugged away from Janet and stomped over to the wounded rustlers. Both were on the ground with bullet wounds in the upper legs, and Colt let out a yell of anger.

"Sam Burke and Jode Simmons! You murdering cow-thieves should ought to be strung up by the necks!"

Sure enough, the prisoners are a part of the square-dance orchestra. Both were punchers drawing pay from the Circle W, and old Tom Wise glared at them angrily. Then he too repeated part of the song Red Rogle had called at the Circle W dance.

"Possum in the wood-pile, a kicking up a fuss,
Old Blue got him. and made quite a muss!"

Red Rogle walked over to Burke's horse and searched the saddlebags. He drew out a saddle-ring, charred from a hot fire. Then he found a pair of pliers and handed them to the sheriff.

"They are your prisoners, Sheriff," Rogle said quietly. "Along with this evidence."

Hadley faced the groveling prisoners. "You want to talk now?" he asked sternly. "It might go easier with you if you give up head and make a clean breast!"

"Get us to a Croaker, Sher'ff," Jode Simmons pleaded. "Me and Sam is bleeding out from these holes in our legs!"

"We'll get you to a doctor in town," Hadley grunted. "For now we'll plug the holes, and tie them off. You fellers will have to ease the tourniquets every ten minutes to keep from getting blood-poison, but they're your legs. Now you start talking, Jode Simmons!"

"It looked easy," Simmons began wearily. "We knew Colt and Red were edging at each other, and you know for why. We changed a few J T brands over to the Lazy J R connected, figuring that Colt would read sign and pin it on Red. While Red was laying in jail, we thought it was a

(Concluded on page 89)

SIX-GUN SAWBONES

By HAROLD PREECE

"Here's your answer," Ford roared, and triggered his guns

The True Story of a FAMOUS TEXAS RANGER

A YUCCA tree snapped in two from a whizzing cannon ball. A horse reared high in the air as a shell crashed through its ribs, then dropped silently with its slain rider. Wild birds tumbled and died with men as the attacking Mexicans charged the Texan defenders of that beleaguered outpost on the Rio Grande.

Casualties had been heavy, that day, among Colonel Jack Hays' Texas Rangers, now fighting as the crack cavalry of the United States Army. It was 1848, the third year of the Mexican War, and of Texas' admission into the Union. The tall man, in his early thirties, had his hands full, as his eyes swept the bullet torn hospital tent.

His face grave, his fingers tireless, he moved among the crowded cots to extract lead from mangled men. When his band-

No good Texan can stand on the sidelines while a battle is raging—and neither could Rip Ford!

ages gave out, he jerked the white shirt from his broad frame and tore it into long strips. He reached into his pocket for a flask, and poured the strong whiskey down the throat of a boy whose arm would have to come off.

There was a salvo of bullets outside. The crude sign which read, JOHN S. FORD, SURGEON AND ADJUTANT, smashed into splinters. Then a sea of invading brown faces surged into the tent. An enemy lieutenant grinned triumphantly at the Ranger doctor.

"Surrender, *senor el medico,*" the Mexican officer purred. "The battle is lost to the gringos. You will be treated with honors befitting a captured officer. I pledge that your wounded will receive the best of treatment."

The doctor sprang forward. "As your generalissimo, Santa Anna, treated Fannin's wounded men at Goliad after they had surrendered honorably!" he roared. "The Texas Rangers haven't surrendered once in this war! I'm breaking no precedent!"

His hands flashed toward his sides. "Here's your answer!" His two Colts barked. The officer fell with a sickening groan, clutching his stomach.

A bullet from a Mexican trooper sang by the doctor's head. "*Muerte a todos Tejanos*—Death to all Texans—" a sergeant shouted. Ford's gun blazed again and the sergeant went down with a hole through his head.

"Let 'em have it, Rip!" a voice yelled from a cot. "And I'm gittin' up to help you!"

Then that which the enemy, invading the sanctity of a hospital tent, hadn't counted on happened.

Wounded Texans staggered to their feet and reached for their guns. The boy with the shattered arm pulled back the muzzle of his gun with his teeth, loaded with his good hand, and began firing. Six troopers dropped on their faces from that first volley by brave men who had risen up to fight again. Colts and carbines blazing, Texans who didn't know how to die dealt death.

In ten minutes, the tent was cleared of the attackers. "All of you boys able to walk follow me," thundered Ford. "By grab they've pushed us around enough today!"

Rangers fighting in desperate little squads against overwhelming odds cheered when they saw Ford and the wounded charge through the deadly fire. Then hearts lifted with carbines. From the pit of destruction, the Texans rose to snatch victory out of defeat.

THEIR captain was dead. But now they rallied around the man whose job was to remove bullets and not shoot them. The high-pitched Ranger yell echoed across the hills of Mexico as the Texans closed ranks to advance with the fury of tigers on the enemy detachment.

Half an hour later, the last attacker was either dead or a prisoner. The news of the victory traveled to general headquarters before nightfall. With it traveled the name of the scholarly, studious man who'd turned the tide when he'd dropped his surgeon's scalpel for a shooting-iron.

But the fighting doctor, who'd wooed bullets, was now trying to jilt glory. His praises were on the lips of every man in the Ranger camp. A lad with a guitar was already strumming out a song about him. He was too busy to listen as he sat in his private tent, writing out death certificates for the brave men who'd fallen that day.

"Private John Smith—R. I. P. Corporal Tom Brown—R. I. P.," he wrote in ornate, large script. The "R. I. P." meant "Rest in Peace." His Ranger comrades had nicknamed him "Rip" for the initial letters of that phrase he inscribed so frequently.

The doctor dropped his pen when a hand from outside raised the flap of his tent. When he saw the insignia on the shoulders pushing through, he jumped to attention. Then he relaxed when he saw his visitor's face.

Dr. Rip Ford welcomed his intimate friend, Colonel Jack Hays, senior commander of the Texas Rangers. The colonel drew something from his jacket pocket, and quickly pinned it on his comrade's chest. Ford looked down to see himself

wearing a resplendent red, white and blue ribbon.

He frowned hard. He'd put in for bandages and quinine. And they'd sent him a ribbon.

"Know you didn't ask for it, Rip," Colonel Hays was explaining. "But it's a personal award for valor from General Winfield Scott, and you've got to wear it. General asked me to remind you, though, that a doctor has noncombatant status under the articles of war. You're not required to fight."

The doctor's frown turned to a chuckle. "Jack," Ford answered. "A Texan can be a lot of things. But there's one thing no Texan can ever be—and that's a noncombatant."

Jack Hays roared with laughter. But during the remaining months of the war, the courageous doctor was showing the whole American army that Texans know no excuses when guns are drawn in battle.

When he wasn't patching up Rangers, he was winning citations as a Ranger. Up and down the lines, crack marksmen from every state were saying that they'd never seen anybody shoot like Rip Ford. At Guadalajara, he shot a high ranking enemy officer at a hundred and twenty-five yards. He blasted his way later out of an enemy ambush with twelve men blazing at him from either side of a steep goat trail. Wherever the Texas Rangers raised their guns, Rip won new glories and made new records for shooting.

He was present at the fall of Mexico City and rode in triumph with his fellow Rangers down the ancient streets of the old capital. But he would rather save lives than take them, and he was glad when that war was finished.

Rip Ford went back to Texas and the hard life of a frontier doctor. But then men he had fought demanded that he be drafted to protect their homes and families.

They were the Mexican *rancheros* in Texas' newly acquired territory between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande. Powerful bandit gangs had taken advantage of the lapse between the surrender of Mexican jurisdiction and the establishment of Texas authority to plunder ranches and peaceful Border settlements. Within a few months, thirteen hundred horses had been stolen, thirty-six people killed, captured, or wounded, by robber groups operating in the area around Corpus Christi. Several hundred families had fled into Mexico, feeling that the American government of Texas would give them no protection.

RIP FORD had quickly made friends with the warm-hearted folk beginning to be known as "the Texas Mexicans." Texas would need them to build up this great new domain that was hers by the fortunes of war. Which meant that the Lone Star state had an obligation of honor to protect their new status as American citizens.

The Texas Mexicans held big celebrations when they heard that he had accepted a commission in late 1850 to command one of five Ranger companies attached to the U. S. Army frontier division of General George M. Brooke. With seventy-nine crack Rangers, Ford swung into action across the outlaw-infested country from Corpus Christi on the Nueces to Brownsville on the Rio Grande.

"Whatever their race, those cut-throats aren't going to depopulate this section," he swore to the alcaldes—mayors—of the Texas-Mexican villages.

He and his company smashed five gangs of Mexican cattle rustlers working together in a gigantic syndicate of crime, and prospectors were still digging up bandit bones fifty years afterward. Next Rip turned his attention to a band of American desperadoes who thought that they could rob with impunity Texans of Mexican descent. He changed their minds after he sent five of them to the gallows and another five to the graveyard direct.

Old-timers along the Border swear that Rip Ford personally accounted for twenty desperadoes in that mop-up campaign—one of the greatest ever staged by the Texas Rangers. He, himself, never admitted it. For he kept records only of the

lives he saved.

After the outlaws were dosed with his prescription of lead, the Ranger commander gave attention to the roving Comanches and Apaches. He summoned the chiefs to a council. They came with their braves, expecting feasts and flattery. Instead, Ford served them Ranger rations of bacon and beans. Then he gave them three days to leave Texas, and they made it in two.

Now the Border was quiet, and the Texas Mexicans were settling down confidently to citizenship under a new flag. Only the wild little bush cattle infested the cactus jungles and they were easier to round up than outlaws. Texas buzzed with the job that Rip Ford had done when the Rangers were mustered out of federal service in the fall of 1851.

When Rip turned in his badge, he toyed with the idea of following his equally famous Ranger comrades, Jack Hays and Ben McCulloch, to the turbulent gold diggings of California. But something he couldn't explain bade him stay in Texas. He didn't realize just what it was till six years later.

It was his knowledge that any man who'd ever worn the Ranger badge always remained at the call of law and order. Former Rangers learned that wherever they went. Hays and McCulloch had never laid hands on a shovel in California. That bandit cursed state had made them put on sheriff's stars the minute they arrived.

In 1858, Texans let Rip Ford know they needed his six-gun even more than his scalpel. For that year was the bloodiest in the entire history of the Lone Star State, with new bands of Comanches raiding and slaying from the Red River to the Rio Grande.

For the third time, the hard hitting sawbones raised his hand and took the oath of the Texas Rangers. Governor Hardin R. Runnels appointed him to Jack Hays' old job as senior Ranger captain. And the Governor's instructions to Ford were brief:

"Follow any and all trails of hostile and suspected Indians. Overtake and chastise them if unfriendly."

FORD realized that piecemeal skirmishes would never crush the Comanches. With the brilliant strategy of a general, he divided his Rangers into four detachments that fanned out over a five-hundred mile stretch from the Central Texas hill country north to the Comanche reservation area of the Panhandle.

He meant to protect peaceful Indians who stayed on the reservation. But he was determined to exterminate the bands that strayed off to pillage. Steadily, his pincers closed in on those who refused to accept the ways of peace. Early in 1858 the Rangers, reinforced by friendly Tonkawa and Lipan Indians, met the runaway Comanches for a showdown on the battle scarred banks of the Canadian River.

The night before the battle Ford moved his men into a secluded spot near the old bull-wagon road leading to Santa Fe. His scouts reported eighty tepees in the Comanche camp across the narrow river. Counting four warriors to a tepee, that meant Ford's command of two hundred Texans and Indians would be facing three hundred and twenty Comanches.

The Ranger commander had meant to rout the enemy in a surprise attack immediately after daybreak. But some excited Tonkawas let go with high-powered Yager rifles and shot a Comanche medicine man who came down to the river just at sunup.

The shot echoed through the enemy camp. Howling Comanches swarmed out of the tepees and jumped on their ponies. A red wave of warriors splashed over the shallow stream and surged toward the Texan camp.

"Hold back in the rear!" Ford shouted to his Rangers. "Let the Comanches think they're fighting another bunch of Indians till we get ready to charge."

The Texans retired a few hundred yards back where they could not be seen by the Comanches. The Tonkawas and the Lipans were no match for a tribe whose fighting ability was unexcelled during the bitter centuries of Indian warfare. For a furious thirty minutes that front line of the friendly Indians held, then broke under the

withering rain of shell and arrow.

"Charge, boys!" Rip Ford ordered his Texans. The surprised Comanches heard the ringing battle yell of the Texas Rangers. They answered joyously with their soaring war cry. The earth shook from the impact when Texan met Comanche and greeted each other with the roar of rifles.

A tall chief aimed a lance at Ford. The Ranger's bullet clipped it into two shattered pieces, then deflected and crashed into the Comanche's skull. Six more warriors rushed up to surround the hard-fighting Texan as the chief dropped from his pony.

Their shots missed, but the powder from their blazing Henry rifles scorched the Ranger's eyes. Half-blinded Ford spurred his horse toward the circle of death.

Bullets spurted from the gun in his right hand. He heard men falling in the last gasping sigh of death. When his eyes cleared, he saw four of the six lying dead on the ground. The whole Comanche band was in full retreat, and galloping madly across the river.

"Follow 'em boys!" Ford yelled. "Smash their village! Stampede their mounts!"

The Rangers spurred their horses into the shallow stream. A minute later, the Texans were thundering into the Comanche war camp. The frail tepees went down under the tearing hoofs of the horses or burst into flame from the torches of the Tonkawas. Other ponies, stolen from settlers, broke into a mad run and scattered in all directions. Later, the Rangers would round them up and return them to their rightful owners. Now they took to the hills to continue the battle.

THE Rangers pursued the Comanches into dense thickets and down steep canyons. That day, the low hills ran with blood till Rip Ford ordered his men to return and call it a day.

When he returned to his camp, he met Indian Agent Shapley P. Ross, a distinguished ex-Ranger.

Ford wiped his face with his bandanna, then asked, "What time in the morning is it, Shap?"

[*Turn page*]

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"Morning, heck!" Ross answered. "It's one o'clock. But look over there."

Ford's eye followed the pointing finger. He saw an Indian coming down a hill. One warrior followed another and then another till again the country was teeming with Comanches.

"We struck a bigger band by routing the first," Ford called to his men. "All right, boys, load up again!"

The first Comanche began shouting taunts at the Tonkawas and Lipans, daring any of them to come forward and fight him singlehanded. Five of Rip's Indian allies took up the challenge. Five of them staggered back wounded. For next to the Texas Rangers, the West never knew better marksmen than the Comanches.

Ford then ordered the combined body of friendly Indians to engage the Comanches. That was a maneuver to draw them down to the flat land where the Texans could fight them on an open field.

The Tonkawas moved forward. The Comanches, taking the bait, poured down from the hills. After ten minutes of fighting, Ford ordered his Rangers to battle for the second time that day.

The tired Texans went into action again, and forgot their tiredness as they swept the Comanches before them. All that afternoon, the battle raged. But steadily, under the expert command of Rip Ford, the Rangers and their allies pursued the Comanches till they were able to make only brief, panting stands before spurring their wearied horses away from the demons in white hats.

One Ranger was wounded, a friendly Indian was killed, when the Comanches made their last stand near a jagged ravine. But when seven of their men lay heaped in a silent pile, the few surviving Comanches disappeared into the hills and were never seen in Texas again.

In the Indian camp, the Rangers recovered wagonloads of merchandise that the Comanches had seized from Santa Fe traders. Finely cut buffalo robes with rows of intricate bead work along the edges were parceled out by Ford as trophies to his loyal Rangers and his loyal friends of the Tonkawas and Lipans.

Not long afterward, Rip Ford received the personal congratulations of a grave, kindly man wearing the uniform of a regular army officer. He was Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee, attached to the U. S. forces stationed in Texas.

The two had supper together at a Ranger camp on the Mexican Border. Rip Ford did not know it at that time, but he and Colonel Lee would soon be fighting together under the banner of a republic that would die aborning.

Texas seceded with the South in 1861 to form the Confederate States of America. Lee became general-in-chief of the Southern forces during the war that followed. He appointed a man of his own mettle, Rip Ford, to be his commandant in that Nueces-Rio Grande stretch Rip knew so well.

Rip held the rank of colonel, and held the border gallantly till Lee surrendered in 1865. During the war he commissioned a Ranger company of Texas-Mexicans to guard the Rio Grande against Border raiders. They served so bravely that the unwritten rule forbidding enlistment of Mexicans was forgotten. Since that time, many Texans of Mexican descent have made outstanding Rangers, and one of them became one of America's noted fingerprint experts.

After the war, Rip retired to his home and his private investments in San Antonio. A writer, who visited him in his old age, described him as "bent but not withered" and having a "wealth of snow-white hair and beard."

The old warrior spent his final years talking of memorable battles and he spoke "through thick veils of cigar smoke."

Texans of three races, Anglo-American, Mexican, and Negro, marched in his funeral procession when he died at the age of eighty-two on November 3, 1897. Three flags under which he had served Texas—the Lone Star, the Stars and Bars, and the Stars and Stripes—draped his coffin.

And if Jack Hays was the first great Ranger captain, Texans swear that Rip Ford was the second.

Landhog Porter Gattrell and his henchmen had made Spurville the hangout of gunmen and owlhoots, and that's why Tovee Harper thought it was—

The Ranger's right hand gun roared

No Town for Lawmen

By DON HOBART

TOVEE HARPER sat slumped down in a chair watching the other men in the hotel office. Through an open window came the sounds usually heard in a little cowtown, now muffled by distance. The rumble of a heavy ranch wagon, the hoofbeats of horses, footsteps on the plank walks, and a man's voice raised in a shout.

Mike Pearson stepped to the window and peered out. Beneath his hat brim his thin face was cruel in the hot sunlight. His black mustache never seemed to hide the ugly twist of his lips.

"Just a drunk," he said. "One of those hombres who likes to make a noise."

"I didn't think it was McAllister," Tovee Harper said quietly.

The three other men glared at him, hating him for having put the fear that was strong within them into words. Harper, who was a tall husky man dressed in worn range clothes remained completely at ease. His big hands did not stray anywhere near the gun in his holster.

That Fred McAllister had sworn he would come back to Spurville and get the men who had driven him away from the town didn't worry Harper as it did the others. He had other things to think about.

"McAllister!" Porter Gattrell snapped the name as he sat behind his desk. "After all he is just a man."

Silence lingered in the wake of the hotel owner's words. Pearson turned again to the window and gazed out at the street. Ben Field leaned against the wall, big, awkward-looking, but amazingly fast with a six-gun.

Gattrell was the only one of them all who did not wear range clothes. The hotel owner was dressed in a business suit, his dark hair parted in the middle,

and the ends of his mustache neatly twisted and waxed. In Harper's estimation the hotel owner, in spite of his keen intellect, was the most ruthless and dangerous man of the trio. Pearson and Field were merely Gattrell's gunmen.

"Reckon I'll go over to the Crystal Bar and have me a drink," Harper said, getting to his feet. "Sitting here watching you three attending your own funerals is right hard on the nerves."

"You seem to forget you're working for me, Harper," Gattrell said coldly. "Suppose I tell you what you do next."

HARPER'S tone was equally cold as he replied:

"You hired me to get McAllister that and nothing more. It is not part of my job to run your errands, or lick your boots. You've got Pearson and Field to act as your bodyguards, but you decided to play it safe by hiring me as a third gunman."

"I don't trust this hombre, boss," Pearson said, glaring at Tovee Harper. "I keep remembering that McAllister has a brother that none of us have ever seen. How do we know that Harper isn't that brother?"

"You don't," Harper said dryly. "Which should make the situation more difficult, shouldn't it?

He deliberately turned his back on the three men as he stepped to the closed door of the office and opened it. He walked out of the office, closing the door behind him without even glancing back over his shoulder at the trio he had left behind.

The office opened into the lobby of the Grand Hotel. The man behind the hotel desk was old and had a gray beard. He continually reminded Harper of a tired billy-goat. His name was Budd Clark. He had wandered into town just two weeks ago, shortly after Harper had arrived and Gattrell had given the old man a job, when he learned that Clark had hotel experience.

On a sudden impulse Harper walked over to the desk. Behind the counter Clark sat on a stool and stared at the big, hard-faced man.

"They still waiting for McAllister?" Clark finally asked softly.

"That's right," Harper answered. "I didn't think you knew about that, Budd."

"If you listen hard enough you can hear a lot in this town," Clark went on. "Folks are getting tired of Gattrell ruling the roost around here. He has made Spurville a hangout for gunmen and owlhoots. The honest citizens of the town, and the ranchers around this section don't like it at all."

"Then why don't they do something about it?" Harper asked.

"Guess too many of them remember what happened to Fred McAllister five years ago," Clark replied. "I've heard the whole story, and I suppose you have, too."

"Only that Gattrell and his men drove McAllister out of town and now they are suddenly afraid that he may come back and get them all."

"So afraid that Gattrell hired you to get McAllister when he learned you have considerable reputation as a gunman," Clark affirmed. The old man shook his head. "You may be good with a pair of six-guns Harper, but you'll never get Fred McAllister."

"Suppose we forget that part of it now," Harper said. "Just what did happen to McAllister?"

"Five years ago Fred owned the Circle M spread over south of town. That was about the time Porter Gattrell bought the hotel here and the saloon as well as the general store and started taking over the town. There is no other town within fifty miles of here. The ranchers, including Fred McAllister of course, depended on the general store here for their supplies. Soon as Gattrell took over he raised prices beyond all reason. The cattlemen didn't like it."

"What about the law?" Harper asked. "I know there is no sheriff here in town. He located at the county seat fifty miles north of here. But he must come and look the town over once in a while or send a deputy to do it. I haven't seen any lawmen around here during the two weeks I've been in town."

"I heard there was a lawman here a few weeks before we came to Spurville," Clark said softly, with a quick glance at the closed door of Gattrell's office. "A Texas Ranger—but he suddenly disappeared."

"Looks like this is no town for law-

men," Harper remarked, and then he grinned. "Which suits me fine. But you still haven't told me all that happened to McAllister."

"When Fred found out about the rise in prices he was sure mad, they tell me," Clark continued. "He came to town to see Gattrell alone one night. Fred was young and husky—but after Gattrell and his gunmen got through beating McAllister with gun barrels, and maybe a couple of rifle butts, he was more dead than alive."

"I don't think his older brother would have liked that," Harper said.

"He sure wouldn't," continued Clark. "Anyway somebody put Fred on his horse and he managed to stay in the saddle until he got back to the Circle M. Then he found that someone had set fire to the ranch buildings and they all burned to the ground. There was a high wind that night."

"From the west," Harper said.

"That's right." Clark tugged thoughtfully at his gray beard. "From the west. Fred left this part of the country the next day. Nobody knows just how—seeing as he was hurt so bad."

"Maybe his brother decided to visit Fred, found him like that and took him away," Harper suggested.

"That might be it. But there was a note fastened to the corral gate out at the Circle M. It read: 'I know the men who did this and I'm going back to get them if it is the last thing I ever do—McAllister.' That was five years ago, and Fred hasn't come back yet."

"Not yet," Harper said with a grin. "But since Gattrell started getting those letters he is sure expected."

SINCE he had been working for Gattrell he had seen three of the letters that the town boss had received. They had been scrawled in pencil. The first had read: "I'm coming back—McAllister." The second had read: "Nothing can stop me from getting you all—McAllister. The third merely said: "Arriving Wednesday—McAllister."

All of the letters had arrived through the mail. The last one had reached Gattrell on Friday of the previous week. This was Wednesday morning, and it might be the day that Fred McAllister would come back to Spurville.

The door of the private office opened. Porter Gattrell stepped out with the two gunmen close behind him. They saw Harper standing at the desk talking to Clark and came toward them.

"Apparently you weren't as thirsty as you thought, Harper," Gattrell said. "I thought you were going over to the Crystal Bar?"

"I still am," Harper said quietly. "There's no hurry about it."

"We've been talking over the idea of you being McAllister's brother," Pearson said, stepping closer to Harper. "And we don't care for the idea at all."

"Maybe McAllister wouldn't like it either," Harper remarked sarcastically. "He might be right particular as to who he has for relatives. Having a gunman like Tovee Harper for a brother wouldn't suit him at all."

"Not if that brother could be hired to kill McAllister," said Gattrell. "Either way we no longer trust you, Harper."

Before Harper even realized the other man's intention Pearson lunged forward and smashed a hard fist against Harper's jaw. The blow staggered him for a moment and sent him reeling back against the hotel desk. He recovered quickly and rushed at Pearson.

The two men closed in and pounded each other with rights and lefts. Behind Harper the hotel owner stood watching. Ben Field drew his gun, and stepped forward, the long barrel of the Colt raised ready to bring it down on Harper's head.

"You picked a fine time to fight among yourselves," Clark said loudly from behind the counter. "Don't forget that McAllister is in town."

"What?" shouted Gattrell. "You mean that McAllister is actually here?"

"He is," opined the hotel clerk.

"Stop that fighting!" Gattrell roared. "Put that gun away, Ben. We've got work to do."

Field lowered his gun and hastily thrust it back into holster. Harper and Pearson stopped fighting. All four men stood gazing at Clark.

"Where is McAllister?" Gattrell asked.

"Hiding," Clark answered. "He didn't think anyone saw him when he sneaked into the hotel just at dawn this morning; but I spotted him and watched. He hid

in that dugout beneath the kitchen where we store stuff. I'll bet he is still there."

"The dugout where we put the—" Pearson broke off abruptly. "So that's where McAllister is now."

"Only one door to that place," Field said. "And if McAllister is there, whoever goes after him better be ready to shoot—and shoot fast."

"Looks like it is your job, Harper," the hotel owner said.

"Why me?" Harper demanded.

"You just reminded me a little while ago that I hired you to get McAllister and to do nothing else, Harper," Gattrell said. "Go ahead and do it. We'll wait here for you."

"All right," Harper said resignedly.

He walked back through the hotel until he reached the kitchen. There was no one there for the Grand Hotel did not serve food since the new owner had taken over the place. Like a good many cowtown buildings, there was no cellar in the hotel, merely the place that had been dug out beneath the kitchen floor and made into a sort of store room.

He found the trapdoor and pulled it open. There was a short wooden ladder fastened to the side of the opening. Harper climbed down this and struck a match. The stub of a candle stood on a packing box. He lighted the candle.

IN THE yellow glow he stared around him. Apparently there was no one else in the dugout but himself. Harper searched through old boxes and barrels, moving them aside, until he found what he was looking for back in a dark corner.

It was the body of a lean, sandy-haired man wrapped and tied in old gunny sacks, so that only his head was visible. Judging by the trenchlike hole in the dirt beside him, he had been buried in a shallow grave here and someone had recently dug him out. He had obviously been dead for some time.

"Sorry, Johnny," Harper said softly. "This isn't the way I hoped to find you, but I'll get the sidewinders who did this."

Harper drew one of his guns, fired two shots into the dirt beneath his feet. He waited a few moments, fired again.

"McAllister sure is giving me a tough fight," he said as he sent a fourth shot into the ground.

Then he calmly reloaded the gun, thrust it back into the holster, and blew out the candle. He climbed up the ladder, walked back through the kitchen and dining room and entered the lobby. Gattrell, Pearson and Field were no longer there. Clark was still behind the desk.

"They're waiting for you in the office," Clark said. "Now that they are sure you got Fred you're next, Harper. You find the other Ranger's body, all right? Took me a lot of digging to fix it so he would be easy to find."

"I found him," Harper said, drawing a Ranger's star-in-a circle badge out of his pocket and pinning it on the left side of his open vest. "What did happen to Fred?"

"He died of his injuries that night at the Circle M five years ago," Clark McAllister said. "After all those letters I had friends mail to Gattrell just said McAllister was coming back. Didn't say whether it was Fred or his older brother —and I sure came back."

Harper nodded as he hurried to the office. He flung the door open and stepped inside fast. Pearson was standing just inside the door. Harper whirled, and his right hand gun roared. Pearson pitched forward, a bullet in his heart.

"A Ranger, eh?" Gattrell said from behind Harper. "This is one time you made a mistake in turning your back on us, Harper."

"No, I didn't," Harper said.

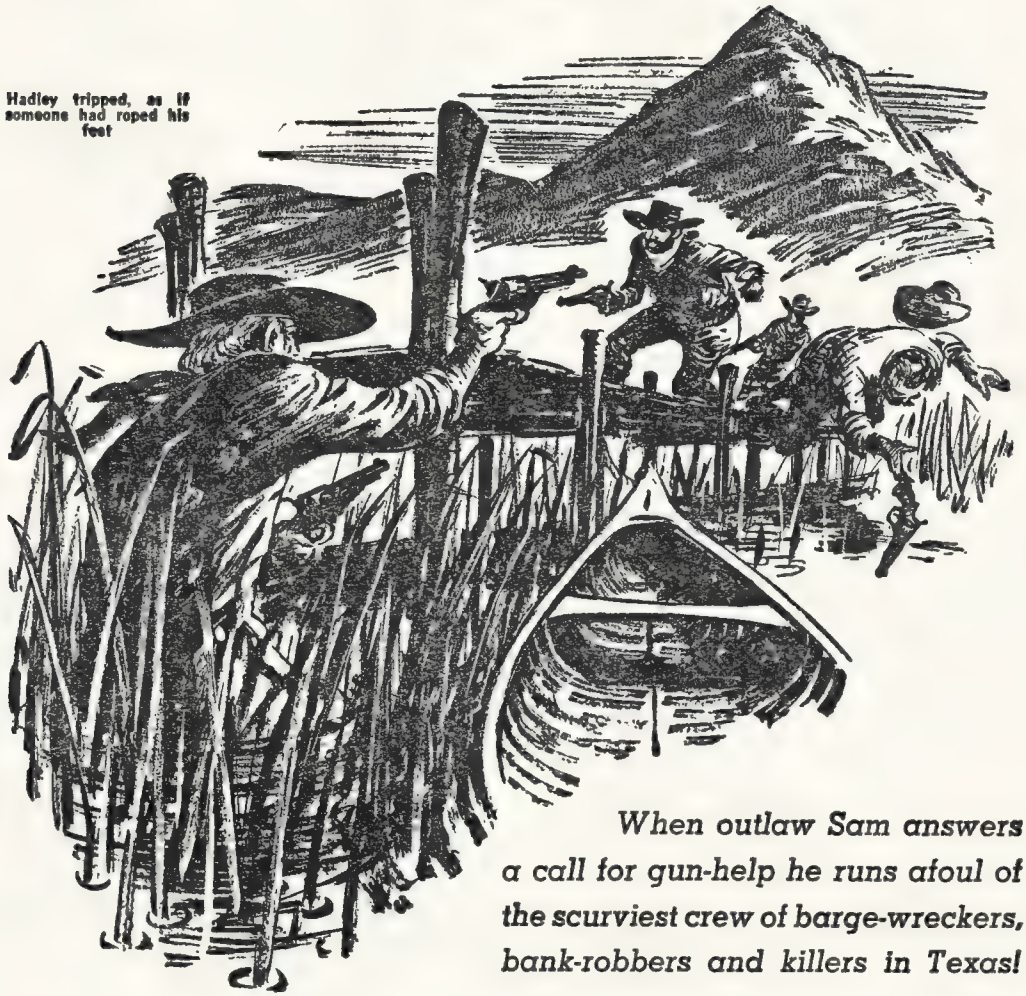
He dropped to the floor below the hotel owner's desk top. From the open door of the office Clark McAllister's gun roared and roared again. Gattrell sprawled across the desk, a bullet in his head, and Field died from a slug in his heart.

"I've got a feeling this is going to be a better town from now on," McAllister said. "As Fred's next of kin I own the Circle M. Wonder if I could sell the ranch and buy this hotel? I kind of like it here."

"We got a report from some of the local citizens about what was going on here," Harper said. "Johnny Lang was the first Ranger sent to investigate—and then when nothing more was heard of him I came to see what I could find out." He smiled faintly. "For a time I figured this was no town for lawmen—but I was wrong about that."

LONG SAM RIDES the RIVER

By LEE BOND



Hadley tripped, as if someone had roped his feet

When outlaw Sam answers a call for gun-help he runs afoul of the scurviest crew of barge-wreckers, bank-robbers and killers in Texas!

BLACK SHADOWS cast by giant tupelo and cypress trees wrapped Long Sam Littlejohn and his ugly old roan gelding, Sleeper, in a protective cloak. Beyond the shadowy forest lay a natural meadow, bright under the Texas sun. Long Sam gazed across that meadow in astonishment, his smoke-colored eyes wide. Out there sprawled the busiest town he had seen in many a moon.

"Seein' is supposed to be believin', Sleeper, but hanged if I believe what I'm seein'!" Long Sam declared.

He pulled off a flat-crowned black hat, running bony fingers through a thick mop of yellow hair. He was a gaunt-flanked

man, unusually tall even among the tall men of Texas. The sateen shirt, tough cotton pants and boots he wore were as black as the wide-brimmed hat he now put back on his head. Crossed black belts held ebony-hued holsters against his bony thighs and from the tops of those holsters curved the black butts of matched six-shooters.

"Ho!" Long Sam commanded when Sleeper fiddle-footed.

But the nervous moving of his horse brought the gaunt man's attention away from the town. He sent a glance over one shoulder, eyes wary. He faced forward again, looking down at Sleeper's ill-shaped head. The roan's scrawny neck was turned to the left. A tingle of sharp unease went through Long Sam. Sleeper's crimpy ears were cocked towards a point where the land tilted down to a forest bottom bordering Horse Bayou.

Outlawed, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam Littlejohn's first impulse was to turn Sleeper around and ride quietly back into the timber. Bad tempered even with his own master, Sleeper gave forth that piggish sort of grunt only when he caught the scent of strange human beings.

"Whoever is down there is keepin' mighty quiet!" the gaunt outlaw fretted. "Maybe I better have a look. That cussed Joe Fry might have cut my sign!"

LONG SAM swung out of the saddle. Joe Fry was a deputy United States marshal, who worked out of Austin. Fry hated Long Sam bitterly, hounding and hunting him constantly. The stocky little derby-wearing deputy had a habit of popping up when Long Sam least expected him.

"Be just my luck to have that Fry pest build a fire under me before I could even get into that Little Boggy town, yonder, and find out what old Ed Scott wants of me," Long Sam grumbled.

He swore under his breath and went on, halting beside a huge tupelo bole when he reached a point where he could see into the lower bottom.

The man Sleeper had heard or scented was not in the timber at all. He was out on the glassy water of Horse Bayou, Indian-paddling a big canoe so expertly there was no slightest sound from his efforts. The canoeist was burly, bull-necked and mean looking. He was towing another canoe behind the one he paddled, dark face turning constantly as he raked each shore of the bayou with nervous glances.

"That bucko is doggoned jumpy about somethin'," Long Sam muttered.

The burly man was heading his canoe inshore now, gliding soundlessly. Long Sam saw a trampled place where stock had often come to drink, and thought the man would land there. The canoes slid on past the spot, however, swinging in finally at a point where the earthen bank was eighteen or twenty inches straight above the water. The man shipped his paddle, reached up a powerful hand, and caught the butt of a huge cypress log that ran far out into the bottom.

"Buster interests me, but I'd better scoot before he finishes moorin' his fleet and comes prowlin' this way!" the gaunt outlaw muttered.

Long Sam was backing away as he muttered his thoughts aloud. When he was certain the man down at the water's edge could not see him, he turned and trotted back to Sleeper, swinging quickly into the saddle. He looked out across the sunlit meadow towards Little Boggy again. Five years ago, he recalled, that town had been nothing more than a cross-roads store with a half-dozen sorry shacks around it. Now the place was busier than a beehive, with a broad main drag fronted solidly by sturdy business buildings!

"I'd heard that old Ed Scott sure set this town to boomin' when he sold his Rail S cattle empire and moved down here," the outlaw chuckled.

Long Sam rode out into the bright sunlight, loping across the meadow towards the outskirts of the town. A mile or so beyond town he could see black smoke funneling up above sprawling structures that had been built along the banks of the Sabine River. That those were factories of some sort he did not doubt. He brought his attention back to the town, eyeing the teeming life along the street

he was riding into. Then his wide lips grinned, and he was reining in before the only brick structure in the new, thriving town.

"Commerce Bank, which Ed Scott built to start this town hummin'," the gaunt outlaw chuckled. "Guess I may as well waltz in there and see what the old boy wants."

Long Sam went up the bank steps and into the lobby, an almost frightened feeling sweeping over him. The marbled bank lobby was full of jostling, noisy people, with long lines before the grilled-off windows. Long Sam found himself wanting to get out of there in a high lope. He saw a shiny oaken door at the back of the room, however, that had old Ed Scott's name on it in gold letters. He got to the door and thumped it with hard knuckles, sending an uneasy glance back into the crowded room.

"Come in!" a muffled voice bade.

Long Sam stepped hastily into a spacious, well-furnished office. A gaunt man with snowy hair and a seamed, lean face looked up across a big desk, blinked keen gray eyes in surprise, then levered to his feet, grinning as he pushed out a bony hand.

"Sam Littlejohn!" the white haired man cried. "Son, it does me good to see you. How are you?"

"I'm scared, Ed!" Long Sam chuckled, shaking hands.

"Scared?" Ed Scott asked, motioning the outlaw to a chair.

"That's right," Long Sam grinned as they both sat down. "Pokin' into a town full of people in broad daylight isn't my idea of playin' it safe. You've really built yourself a town here, Ed! Like this better than runnin' cattle out in the Panhandle?"

"I get lonesome for the Panhandle, Sam," the older man sighed. "But I'm too busy here to fret much. Once I broke the ice, other men with money to invest have come to Little Boggy. We've got lumber mills, a paper mill, rice mills and a number of other flourishing enterprises."

"But it hasn't all been smooth sailing, eh?" Long Sam asked, hoping the banker would say why he had sent for him.

"So my troubles with Mort Hadley are gettin' talked around, are they, Sam?" the old ex-cowman asked gravely.

"Not that I know of, Ed," the outlaw shrugged. "I never heard of anybody named Mort Hadley until you just called his name."

SCOTT snorted. "I wish I hadn't seen or heard of Mort Hadley! The fat devil owns a couple of saloons, several sawmills, and operates a string of barges that ply between Little Boggy and the Gulf."

"This Hadley jigger out to deal you some competition?" Long Sam asked.

"He's a cutthroat, at any thing he gets into!" the old fellow snapped. "But Hadley makes more trouble with his barges than anything else. He charges stiff shipping rates and manages to keep other barge owners along the Sabine from offering shippers better rates."

"No other outfit has the nerve to lower rates and tell Hadley to go jump, eh?" Long Sam wanted to know.

"One company, the Acme, tried it!" Scott replied grimly. "They lost eight cargo barges and two tugs within six months."

"What caused the losses?" Long Sam wanted to know.

"Mysterious explosions sank most of the barges on runs between here and the Gulf," Ed Scott declared. "Fire got the tugs and three of the big, shallow-draft barges."

"And you think this Mort Hadley sank those barges and tugs to put a stop to cut-rate competition, eh?"

"Mort Hadley and those three gunmen of his, Dan Conklin, Zeke Wayne and Ward Potter, destroyed those barges and tugs." Ed Scott growled. "I can't *prove* that. But that pig-fat devil has to be stopped, Sam. I'm pulling wires now to get a huge canal run through here. Hadley is fighting that move bitterly, for the big canal would mean big barge outfits coming in with lower rates."

"Well, Ed, I'm sure not a sea-going gent by any means!" Long Sam grinned. "But if needing help at puttin' a halter on this Hadley gent is why you sent for me, I'll

be glad to help you any way I can."

"Sent for you?" the white-haired banker echoed.

Long Sam snapped erect in his chair. He looked levelly at the older man, trying to spot something that would hint of joking. Ed Scott's face was grave, his eyes puzzled.

"Word came down the outlaw trails that you wanted to see me, bad," Long Sam explained slowly. "I was out at the head of this Sabine River when I heard of it, Ed. I rode close to five hundred miles to see what you wanted. You didn't pass out word that you wanted to see me?"

"So help me, son, I didn't!" the oldster cried. "But why would anyone else put out such word?"

"I don't know why," Long Sam scowled. "You happen to know a deputy United States marshal named Joe Fry?"

"I've heard of Fry," the banker nodded. "Do you think he could have pulled this stunt of getting you here?"

"He could have, and would have if he thought it would give him a chance to nab me!" the gaunt outlaw grumbled.

"The Texas Rangers have never bothered you at all, have they, Sam?" Scott asked.

"Thank heavens, no!" Long Sam replied. "If those lads went after me, I'd be a sunk duck. But the Rangers seem to know that the only trouble I ever got into was over fightin' the murderin' mob the carpetbaggers put in as state police, right after the war."

"I know, Sam," Scott said gravely. "I remember you first got on the wrong side of things when the carpetbaggers were ridin' roughshod over us all. But I had occasion to go to Austin a couple of months ago, son. On the way there, I noticed a number of big dodgers tacked to trees, fences and the like. Those dodgers had your picture, name, description and a list of crimes you're supposed to have committed."

"That's Joe Fry's work!" the gaunt outlaw declared angrily. "He's tryin' to pressure and bamboozle the Texas Rangers into turnin' against me."

"A man named Bob Gossard is our town marshal," the old banker smiled. "Gossard is a friend of mine. I'll speak to him if you want to stay around a while, son."

"I'm gettin' out of here, Ed!" Long Sam exclaimed. "Whoever passed out that lie that you wanted to see me had somethin' besides a joke in mind, I'm afraid."

"I don't blame you for being uneasy," the banker began. "I'm sorry my name was used to —"

Knuckles tapped smartly at the oaken door, causing Ed Scott to break off. He glanced at Long Sam who had jerked to his feet in a nervous movement.

"Who is it?" the banker called.

The portal opened a few inches. Long Sam heaved a sigh of relief when he saw a young fellow glance in, smiling pleasantly.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Scott," the young man said. "But Jim Nelson is here, wanting to see you. Mr. Nelson is very insistent."

"Tell Nelson I will see him in five minutes, Ted," Ed Scott directed.

The young fellow nodded, then closed the door.

LONG SAM tugged his hat on, glancing around the office. He saw a door in the rear wall, and surmised that it would lead out to an alley.

"Drat that Nelson, anyhow!" old Ed Scott was grumbling. "But I'll have to see the pest. Mort Hadley has no doubt sent him here for some reason or other."

"I see you've got a back door, Ed, so I'll use it," Long Sam drawled. "Glad to have seen you again. Maybe next time I drop in we can—"

Long Sam whirled, for the door leading out into the bank had slapped open. The gaunt outlaw's hands started toward gun butts, but halted inches short of the famous weapons. A stubby little man wearing a tailored gray suit, button shoes and a shiny black derby hat stepped inside, shouldering the door shut behind him. The man't blunt-jawed face was flushed, his gray eyes shone hotly, and he grinned around the butt of a cigar that was clamped in one corner of his mouth. A cocked six-shooter jutted from the stocky

man's right fist!

"What's the meaning of this, Jim Nelson?" old Ed Scott's voice ripped out angrily.

"So this is the 'Jim Nelson' who wanted to see you, is it, Ed?" Long Sam sighed.

"This is Jim Nelson, Sam," the old banker growled. "I've no idea why he is here, pointing a gun at you. But I'm not surprised too much! Nelson runs with Mort Hadley. He's been here a couple of months."

"Relax, Ed!" Long Sam groaned. "This sawed-off thing with an armadillo's hull for a hat happens to be Joe Fry, the deputy United States marshal I was tellin' you about. If he's been around here for a couple of months, then the mystery of who sent out word that you wanted to see me is solved."

"And you walked into my little trap neat and quick, Sammy!" Fry chortled. "You have been a hard devil to corral, but I've got— What the heck!"

Long Sam was wondering what the heck, too. A sort of roaring sound, as of distant thunder, filled the air. The two windows in Ed Scott's office wall jumped and clattered. The rumbling seemed prolonged, fading slowly. Outside, people were shouting frenziedly, a bell began clanging, and from down towards the Sabine River where Long Sam had seen those big buildings and smoke stacks, a whistle was screaming.

"The fire bell!" old Ed Scott yelled. "And that was some kind of explosion down at the river. That whistle—"

"Shut up, you old fool, and sit back down!" Joe Fry horned in savagely.

The shouting and yelling outside was a vast roar of sound now, and Long Sam could hear horses and rigs tearing along the street. The bell was still hammering wildly and the whistle down at the Sabine was screaming louder than ever. Old Ed Scott's face paled, and Long Sam saw anger leap into the ex-cowman's eyes as he locked glances with Joe Fry.

"What authority do you think you have to point a gun at me and order me around, Mr. Fry?" Scott asked.

"Hobnobbin' with a vicious crook like this Littlejohn buzzard here, is enough reason for me to slam you in jail for questioning, if I take the notion!" Fry retorted.

Guns were roaring out along the street now and Long Sam wondered why anyone considered shooting necessary. The shouting and clattering and howling out there indicated that the townspeople were already thoroughly alerted. Suddenly there was a burst of firing either inside the bank or at the front door. Long Sam shot a worried look at Ed Scott, who had sworn thickly and started around the desk.

"That shooting was inside my bank!" the old man cried.

Ed Scott stalked around the desk, glaring when Joe Fry swore and punched at his middle with the cocked six-shooter. Long Sam groaned in dismay, fearing that the cocked pistol would go off. Ed Scott went against the gun hard, then spun suddenly on one foot, slashing down a lean arm that swept Fry's forearm and gun-filled fist aside. The six-shooter roared and Fry squalled like an angry cat, whipping the gun up and cocking it as he leaped back.

"The marshal at Austin happens to be a personal friend of mine, Fry!" Ed Scott gritted. "You'll pay for this bit of— What in time!"

Joe Fry had jumped back until his sturdy back flattened against the office door. But suddenly that door exploded inward with him, bowling him clean off his feet. Fry's six-shooter roared again, the slug driving into the floor as the deputy fell. Then Long Sam and old Ed Scott were both yelling and ducking, for a slicker-clad, h e a v i l y - masked man crouched there in the open doorway, a blazing six-shooter in each fist!

"Bandits!" Ed Scott howled. "There are two more of the masked devils behind the cages, Sam!"

BUT LONG SAM had his own troubles just then. A bullet from the masked man's gun had raked across the left side of his face, making him dodge violently. The gaunt outlaw's deadly six-shooters came up roaring just as a shot from one of the masked man's guns knocked old

Ed Scott tumbling. The masked man howled an oath and reeled backwards into the bank. Long Sam lunged towards the portal, remembering what Ed Scott had said about other masked men out there.

"No you don't, S a m m y!" Joe Fry screeched, and slammed into Long Sam's midriff, head first.

Joe Fry was short-coupled, powerfully muscled, and as quick as a cat. He drove Long Sam savagely against Ed Scott's desk, swinging his six-shooter up. Long Sam slashed at Fry's back and shoulders with his guns, hearing the deputy curse in pain. Long Sam dropped his own left-hand pistol and seized Fry's gun wrist, forcing his hand down and to one side just as the pistol roared. The deputy bleated a furious oath and lunged against the outlaw, driving his hips savagely against the edge of Scott's desk.

"Bank robbers, Joe!" Long Sam gasped. "You fool, we've got to stop the bank robbers!"

Fry pounded his free fist into Long Sam's face. The outlaw rolled sidewise off the edge of the desk, hanging desperately to the officer's gun wrist. They went down in a hard fall, Fry's six-shooter roaring so close to Long Sam's face the outlaw felt the flame of powder on his cheek and throat. The deputy drove a knee into Long Sam's middle, and the outlaw felt his senses reel from the sickening pain. He swung the six-shooter in his right hand, faintly aware that a jolting sensation ran along his arm.

"Tagged the runt!" Long Sam croaked dazedly.

Fry's blocky form flopped down on him. The gaunt outlaw struggled for breath, the pain in his midriff making him blind and a little sick. He rolled over and looked glassily at the deputy. His wild swing had caught Fry across cheek and temple, knocking the officer cold.

"Ed!" Long Sam croaked, staring at old Ed Scott.

The banker lay sprawled on his back, snowy hair matted with blood. Long Sam shuddered, snatched up his second gun, and got to his feet. His hat was gone but he wasted no time looking for it, reeling to the doorway and out into the bank. From outside came wild shouting and a sudden burst of firing.

"Masked men!" someone yelled. "They come out of the bank. Robbers! Bank robbers!"

Long Sam heard muffled shouts and dull thumping sounds that seemed to come from a huge vault behind the row of grilled windows, but took no time to investigate. He pounded down the bank floor on rubbery legs, almost falling when he jumped out to the steps. He saw four riders tearing east along the main stem, shooting back at doorways from which pistols and rifles flamed. The four mounted men wore slickers and masks, and one of them had a meal sack clutched under one arm.

Long Sam's guns lifted, and suddenly their double thunder hammered out along the street. He saw the man with the meal sack lurch violently, start toppling backwards out of the saddle. But two other masked men pressed in, grabbing the fellow before he could fall. Then they were swinging off the street, streaking down across the meadow Long Sam had traversed getting to town.

"Good shootin', Slim!" an excited voice shouted.

Long Sam made no attempt to reply. He lurched down the steps, leaped into Sleeper's saddle, and threw the spurs to the old roan. The gaunt outlaw reloaded his guns as he rode, smoky eyes hard and narrow as he swept to the meadow and started across. He saw the four masked men approaching the timber along Horse Bayou. The wounded bandit was slowing the others down, for it took two of them to keep him in the saddle.

When the four masked men vanished into the timber, Long Sam bored straight on for another few moments. Then, judging that he had given the men time to ride down into the second bottom, Long Sam flung Sleeper hard to the right. He struck timber two hundred yards from where the masked men had gone into the bottoms, slowing Sleeper as he reached the first huge trees. He was looking back, watching the point where the four bandits had

disappeared. He yelped in sudden astonishment, hauling Sleeper to a squatting halt.

HORSES were pouring out of the timber at about the point where those four masked fellows had gone into the bottom. The horses came boiling out into the meadow at a hard run, several of them squealing and kicking at brushy drags that had been tied to their tails. Off in the bottoms, Long Sam could hear other horses crashing through brush and whinnying as they scattered.

"Clever!" the gaunt outlaw growled. "Those four bandits had a big bunch of horses, all shod, no doubt, cached down in the timber somewhere. They've scattered the broncs all directions, which would sure fog their sign."

Long Sam put Sleeper on into the dense timber, riding down to the first bottom. He could still hear horses somewhere up the bayou, and rode with a six-shooter in his right hand and his eyes keenly alert.

"By grab!" the outlaw cried suddenly. "I just remembered that tough lookin' gent with those two big canoes. What if those four bandits piled into those canoes and took to the bayou?"

Long Sam stretched up in the stirrups, watching the shadowy timber ahead of him more keenly than ever. He saw the huge old cypress log at last, slowing his mount to a cautious walk as he approached. Those canoes were no longer at the butt of the cypress log!

"Somethin' tells me my bandits took to the water on me!" the outlaw growled.

He rode down to where the butt of the log stuck out over the water, smoky eyes sharpening when he saw boot prints in the loose soil. Then he saw blood smears on the butt of the log, and was about to dismount for a closer look at the sign when the faint sounds of shouting came in across the meadow.

"A pack of galoots headin' out from town!" Long Sam groaned. "And Joe Fry will likely be with 'em!"

The outlaw started up the bayou bottoms at a hard clip. He kept watching the placid waters of the bayou. When he swept around the second bend he saw the water rippling. Then he rounded the third bend, and a Satanic grin stretched his wide lips.

The two canoes were near the opposite shore, still held together by a ten foot length of thin hemp. A huge, pink-faced man was in the bow of the forward canoe, paddling furiously. In the stern of the same canoe a slim, red-haired man worked a paddle feebly.

In the stern of the second canoe was the same big, dark man Long Sam had seen anchoring the craft at the butt of the old cypress log, earlier that morning. Sprawled on the canoe bottom, face down, lay a wiry looking man. Forward of the sprawled man were two saddles. Amidships of the first canoe were two more saddles.

"So that's it!" Long Sam droned. "These buzzards had a band of horses hid out down here in the timber. They robbed the bank, raced back to the horses, and stampeded the animals, turnin' their own mounts loose, too. Now if I could get close enough— Blazes!"

Long Sam's voice ended on a growl of dismay. The huge man in the leading canoe had spun the craft's nose into a narrow run of water that came out into the bayou from the opposite side. Long Sam groaned again when he glanced along that run, noticing that the heavy cypress and tupelo forests played out over there. He could see cane heads waving in a gentle breeze, and swore when he saw both canoes line out down that narrow run of water that went out into the bottoms and on into the tangled growth of cane.

"Pull a little bit, Zeke!" the huge man piloting the two canoes called out harshly.

"My side's killin' me, Mort!" the slim red-head behind him whimpered. "That Littlejohn hellion's slug must have cracked a rib."

"Quit whinin', and do a little paddlin'!" the fat man rumbled. "How's Ward makin' out back there, Dan?"

Long Sam's mind was racing, grasping and remembering those names. Old Ed Scott had spoken of a fat man named "Mort" Hadley. Scott had also said some-

thing about Hadley having three toughs working for him named Dan Conklin, Zeke Wayne and Ward Potter. That the four men in those two canoes were Mort Hadley and his hirelings Long Sam did not doubt.

"Ward ain't moved since I laid him in the canoe, Mort!" big Dan Conklin called. "Want me to see if he's still breathin'?"

"Not now!" Mort Hadley's voice reached out. "It ain't far to them duck blinds. A posse will be hittin' these bottoms any time. We're supposed to be in Houston on business, so if we're seen there'll be hell to pay. Lean into your paddlin', Dan!"

Dan Conklin hunched his powerful back and dug hard. Long Sam Littlejohn glanced around, thinking fast. Putting Sleeper into the bayou and swimming across to the opposite side would be of little help, even if he did not wind up bogging his horse in the ooze along one of the shores.

"Duck blinds over in that canebrake somewhere, eh?" he thought.

LONG SAM dismounted, watching the two canoes slide along to the wall of spindly cane, then disappear. He began moving around then, urged to nervous haste by the sounds of shouting far down the bottom. The posse from town had come to the spot where Mort Hadley and his men had scattered that bunch of horses. With a lot of excited fellows milling around, Long Sam guessed the chance of any of them ever figuring out what had happened would be nil.

"Ha!" the gaunt outlaw cried suddenly.

He raced to a huge pile of driftwood that high water had piled against a bunch of cypress knees. He began tearing away sticks and logs and brush, emerging finally with a battered door that looked as though it had once been on someone's chicken house. He carried the door down to the water's edge, laid it on the bank, and hastily stripped, piling his clothing and guns on a mound of brush he placed in the middle of the old door. He eased the raft out onto the water, then waded in.

"Hope to gosh a bunch of those big crabs don't decide to hang their claws into me!" he gulped.

Long Sam flattened out and began swimming as quickly as possible, pushing the crude raft ahead of him. He crossed the bayou and beached his raft at the mouth of the run up which the two canoes had gone. Then he stood on the planks and dressed, staring at the canebrake beyond the timber with mounting uneasiness.

"Even if I can wade out to wherever Hadley and his bunch have holed up in duck blinds, I'll have to watch out for cotton-mouth moccasins and 'gators!" he muttered.

Long Sam discovered that he could wade the narrow ditch without much trouble. But the shaggy tangle of cane on each side of him made him jump every time the wind rustled it. He kept a gun in each fist and watched the water constantly, expecting to meet an alligator or a cottonmouth at every second. He was in water thigh-deep and feeling his way along the oozy bottom cautiously when a heavy fish of some sort butted his shin, then flashed between his legs. Long Sam jumped and thrashed and made the water roar, barely choking back a howl of alarm.

"Listen, Mort!" a voice jarred out. "What's makin' all that fuss in the water, you reckon?"

"An alligator, likely!" Mort Hadley retorted. "Or maybe a big 'gou our boats excited. Give me a hand with Ward."

Long Sam crouched, almost bellying the water. The voices had come from just ahead, where the narrow opening he was following through the walls of swaying cane turned sharply.

"Do gaspagou run up into this open water from the bayou, Mort?" Dan Conklin's deep voice asked.

"I've caught scads of 'gou right off this catwalk!" Hadley answered vexedly. "Shut up and get busy, can't you?"

Long Sam crouched there and listened until he heard footfalls slogging away over boards that gave off a hollow sound. Then he waded slowly forward. As he eased around the sharp turn he saw open water ahead of him and halted, eyes raking a lagoon that would, he judged, cover about five acres.

Perhaps twenty yards from where Long Sam stood the two shiny canoes rode the placid lagoon, tied to a board catwalk that was nailed to stout cypress stakes. The walk was about two feet wide, and ran along the east side of the lagoon to a row of four hut-like structures that had board floors, with walls and roofs of cane cut from the brakes. Those little huts were duck blinds, used by hunters in fall and winter. In front of the first blind lay two of the saddles Long Sam had seen in the canoes.

"Hadley and his bunch won't be expectin' trouble here!" Long Sam chuckled. "So if my luck holds out, I ought to nab them before they know anyone is around!"

But Long Sam's luck did not hold. Suddenly the canes behind him shuddered violently. He whirled, hearing a roaring splash. Then Long Sam was yelling and thrashing wildly backwards, goggling at a huge alligator that came streaking at him. The alligator swerved, splashing wildly again in its scramble to get into the open water of the lagoon.

"Now I've done it!" Long Sam gasped.

And indeed his yelling had done mischief. Huge, pink-faced Mort Hadley and big burly Dan Conklin jumped from the nearest duck blind, goggling at Long Sam. Wiry, red-headed Zeke Wayne lurched out behind them, stripped to the waist, holding a wadded undershirt to a ragged bullet cut along his left side.

"Littlejohn!" Conklin roared. "Boss, that son follered us here!"

Mort Hadley and Zeke Wayne jerked pistols, firing the moment the weapons were clear of holsters. Long Sam slammed towards the end of the catwalk, blazing away with both guns. He saw Zeke Wayne spin, land in the lagoon with a geysering splash. A bullet ripped the top of Long Sam's right shoulder, knocking him down in the water.

"Rush him, Mort!" Conklin bawled.

FEET BEGAN pounding and Long Sam shook water from his guns, smoky eyes wickedly cold. Then he heaved himself up and leveled his pistols, unconsciously humming a dirge through bared teeth as he cut loose. A bullet burned across his right arm, touching too lightly to spoil his aim. Another plucked at the wet cloth of his shirt collar.

Dan Conklin fell with a slamming wallop that threatened to wreck the catwalk. Mort Hadley tripped as if someone had roped his feet, bellowing at the top of his lungs as he sprawled out into the lagoon. Conklin rolled over and tried to sit up, but fell off the catwalk atop Mort Hadley, who was just surfacing. Long Sam sighed, crawled upon the catwalk, and stood there, dripping and panting.

"Hadley, you and Conklin swim towards the first duck blind!" he ordered.

"My leg's nearly broke!" Conklin spluttered.

"Start swimming!" Long Sam snorted, and smashed a bullet into the water beside Conklin's head.

The big bandit dived. He came up swimming strongly, heading towards the catwalk. Mort Hadley followed, wallowing heavily in the water and cursing at every walloping stroke of his thick arms. Zeke Wayne had hold of the catwalk before the first duck blind. He hung limp and ashen, blood welling out of a clean puncture at the base of his neck. Conklin and Mort Hadley pounded up and grabbed the catwalk near Wayne, glaring balefully as Long Sam sloshed up.

"Come out of that blind, Potter, and join your pards!" Long Sam called.

"Ward Potter is dead, you meddlin' whelp!" Mort Hadley rumbled.

Boots scraped on dry boards, then bantam-legged little Ward Potter staggered out to the catwalk. He was chalky white, and tried to say something. But his knees bent and he pitched down on the walk, moaning in pain as he put a hand to his right shoulder.

"I thought he was dead!" Mort Hadley said lamely.

"You're a liar, fat boy!" Long Sam snorted. "You hoped I'd take your word for it and Potter would twist a slug into my back. What was the explosion and fire, back in town?"

"Explosion and fire?" Hadley sneered. "I don't know what you're talkin' about! But you'll wish—"

Hadley's voice was drowned by the roar of the six-shooter in Long Sam's left hand. The fat man screamed, rolled backwards into the water, and went out of sight. He bobbed to the surface promptly however, grabbing the catwalk with his left hand, while he cupped his pudgy right hand over a bullet nicked ear. Hadley's face looked like a huge mound of fresh dough.

"What was that fire and explosion?" Long Sam asked coldly.

"The Acme docks!" Hadley gasped.

"You had that barge company blasted, then fired, so's everyone would rush out of town!" Long Sam gritted. "That gave you and these other three rats a fairly safe swipe at the bank. But your main purpose in makin' the bank holdup play was to murder Ed Scott, wasn't it?"

Before Mort Hadley could reply there was a shout behind Long Sam. He whirled, crouching over lifting guns. Then the gaunt outlaw straightened up, a glad smile on his lips. Old Ed Scott, a white bandage around his head, came splashing out of the drainage ditch. Behind Scott came a big, grizzled man who had a scattergun in his hands and a shiny badge on his vest.

"It's all right, Sam!" Ed Scott called. "The fellow with me is Bob Gossard, Little Boggy's marshal."

The marshal and Scott scrambled to the boardwalk, then came trotting forward. Long Sam looked down at the three men dangling in the water, and thought he had never seen three more frightened men in his life.

"I found Sleeper over across the bayou, Sam," Scott panted. "Then Bob and me saw that henhouse door you used for a raft to get across the bayou and took a swim ourselves. You hurt much, son?"

"I'm nicked a little, but nothin' serious," Long Sam chuckled. "And I'm mighty glad you and the marshal followed my sign over here. The loot from your bank will be in that duck blind there, I reckon. This ought to get Mort Hadley years enough in the pen to keep him from makin' you any more trouble, too!"

"Hadley and these other three hellions will hang!" the old banker said grimly.

"What are you talkin' about?" Mort Hadley growled. "Even if you fiddle around and get me sent up for robbin' your bank, you'll be doin' well."

"Guess again, Hadley!" Marshal Bob Gossard grated. "Someone saw Guy Spee and Tony Madlin, two of your flunkies, sneakin' away from the Acme docks just before those explosions wrecked the place. I picked Guy and Tony up, and they've confessed that you hired them to blow up the Acme docks. Three Acme employees were killed in those blasts and the fires that followed. That makes the charges murder!"

"And I hope a jury hangs them!" Long Sam growled. "But watch them, while I get ropes off the saddles, yonder. I want to get back to Sleeper and scoot yonderly before that Fry pest sights me again."

"Don't worry about Joe Fry!" the big marshal chuckled. "He's locked up in my jail."

"Jail?" Long Sam cried.

"That's right, son!" Scott laughed. "Fry was in my office, remember, holdin' a gun on me as well as you, while my bank was robbed and my employees were locked in the vault. Add to that the fact that Fry has been herdin' with this Hadley crook for the past two months and you can see that I've got a right to demand that Joe Fry be held and questioned, even if he is an officer of the law."

"Joe Fry won't be pesterin' you for several days, at least, Littlejohn!" Marshal Bob Gossard chuckled.

"What are you buzzards up to, anyhow?" Mort Hadley bleated. "I don't know a badge-man or anybody else named Joe Fry!"

"That dude who has been callin' himself Jim Nelson around town is actually Joe Fry, a deputy United States marshal, Hadley," Long Sam said gruffly. "What kind of a deal did you have cooked up with him?"

(Concluded on page 97)

TOO SMART FOR HIS OWN GOOD

Dawson didn't believe in ghosts—let alone those toting six-guns!

By SAM BRANT

BEN DAWSON sat on a flat rock and stared at the rolling hills all around him. After a man has spent twenty years wandering through country like this hunting gold he is not inclined to devote his leisure to admiring the view. It was strange how each one of those years seemed to grow longer with the passing of time.

Dawson could remember when he had walked twenty or thirty miles a day and thought nothing of it. Now he got right tuckered out when he traveled even half that distance on foot.

"Reckon I must be getting old," he muttered, tugging at his short white beard. "When a man is crowding seventy he sure likes to sit and rest a lot."

He stopped talking and just sat there, a tall lean old man dressed in a flannel shirt, levis with the bottoms of the overall trousers pulled down over low-heeled walking boots. There was a cartridge belt around his waist, and a gun in the holster. The hat that covered his thick white hair was old and battered.

It was strange how lonely he had been since Dolly had died three weeks ago. It was hard to remember how many years they had traveled together—Ben Dawson and his little gray burro. Dolly had carried heavy packs all over this part of the West, mostly supplies, but there had been times when the burro had carried gold. In those twenty years Dawson had made a few strikes and excitedly staked his claims, but they had never amounted to very much.

Despite all the wandering he had done, the hills in which Ben Dawson now found himself were new to him. It was wild country, spotted with thick growths of brush and trees and towering cliffs. There were huge boulders scattered about and even in the bright sunlight of early afternoon there were places where shadows loomed black—almost menacing.

Back in the little cowtown ten miles to the south the local citizens had warned Dawson to keep out of this region they called Shadow Valley. It had been Adam Martin, sheriff of the county that took in

the valley, who had told the old prospector the most.

"You may find gold somewhere back in those hills, Dawson," the sheriff said. He was big, rawboned and middle-aged. "If you do, you will be luckier than most folks who have looked for it. Some men who headed into those hills never came back."

"Why not?" Dawson asked.

"Hard to say." Sheriff Martin frowned. "There's been talk of Shadow Valley being a good hideout for wanted men. I've been through there, but never found anyone. It is a right big place for one man to search alone though." The lawman rubbed his chin thoughtfully with one hand. "Some folks claim there is a ghost in that valley—a ghost that kills."

DAWSON wasn't too much impressed by what he had learned in the cowtown. He didn't believe in ghosts, and he had encountered owlhoots before in his wanderings. He had learned that if he didn't bother such men they would leave him strictly alone.

The old prospector had a little money left from the last small strike he had made. In the town he had bought another burro and the supplies he needed, fastened a pack on the animal and headed for the valley. Now after a week of traveling he was in the center of the wild region.

His new burro was a male and Dawson hadn't even named him yet. Since the burro was balky, cantankerous and stubborn Dawson had thought of a lot of names for him, most of which weren't suitable for permanent use. Dolly had had such an even disposition that his new burro made Dawson miss her all the more.

As he sat on the flat rock a quarter of a mile from where he had made his camp Dawson was conscious of a faint rustling in some brush behind him. The old prospector sensed danger, but he wasn't fool enough to grab for the gun in his holster before he glanced back. Too many men had been shot in the back by doing just that.

He looked back over his shoulder. A big man stepped out of the brush. He was at least twenty years younger than Dawson. He had thick black hair and a black beard that didn't look more than a couple of months old. He was dressed in a checkered shirt, levis and walking boots. There was a cartridge belt buckled around his waist, but no gun in the holster.

"Morning," the stranger said. "Sure was surprised when I found I had company. It's been right lonely in this neck of the woods." He circled around the rock so that he stood in front of Dawson, who remained seated. "I'm Lem Hopper."

"I'm Ben Dawson," said the old prospector. "Figured I might find gold in this valley."

Hopper seemed friendly enough, but there was a hardness in the black-bearded man's dark eyes that Dawson did not like —a constant watchfulness about him that reminded the old prospector of a jungle beast waiting for a chance to spring. The empty holster Hopper wore was a tip-off. A man without a gun would be smart to be friendly toward one who was armed.

"Heard there is gold here," Hopper said. "Been looking for it myself, but haven't had any luck." He swayed as though from sudden weakness. "Something funny about this place," he said. "I found that someone had stolen all my supplies when I woke up yesterday morning. Even got my gun and I haven't seen a soul around here but you."

"Meaning you figure I might have taken them?" Dawson asked quietly.

"Of course not!" Hopper said impatiently. "Just telling you what happened. I haven't eaten since the night before last and I'm right hungry."

"Reckon we can do something about that." Dawson got to his feet. "My camp is over there to the north about a quarter of a mile from here. I've got plenty of food. Seeing as you are younger than I am you go on ahead and dish yourself up some grub. I ate earlier this morning."

"All right, thanks," Hopper said.

He headed northward, walking fast for a man who was supposedly weak from hunger. Dawson smiled faintly and then followed at a slower pace. He took his time

getting back to the camp, stopping to inspect a small creek and consider the possibilities of panning gold there.

When he finally reached the camp, Lem Hopper had a pot of coffee boiling over a small fire and was frying some bacon. He glanced up as Dawson stepped into the clearing.

"Pretty wild country for nothing but a six-gun," Hopper said. "Don't you carry a rifle with you, Old Timer?"

Ben Dawson glanced casually around. He was a neat man and when he arranged his possessions around him, as he had in making the camp, he knew exactly where everything had been placed. There was no doubt that Hopper had searched for a weapon of some sort, for the black-bearded man had been careless about it.

Dawson had a rifle, but he had not been foolish enough to leave the gun where it could be easily found, when he had left his camp unguarded. The Winchester was well hidden and Dawson decided it would remain that way for the time being at least.

"Haven't needed to do any shooting up to now," Dawson said in answer to Hopper's question and let it go at that. "Course if whoever stole your stuff shows up that might be different."

Hopper didn't say anything further. He drank the coffee and ate the bacon without bothering to offer Dawson any of his own food. The old prospector seated himself cross-legged on the ground, drew out an old pipe, filled and lighted it.

"How many days has it been since you threw the posse off your trail?" he asked casually.

Hopper choked on a sip of coffee and then glared at him. It was not what Dawson considered a friendly look. It was probably just as well that Hopper didn't have a gun at the moment.

"Smart, aren't you?" he growled, still glaring at the old prospector. "Maybe a bit too smart for your own good, Dawson."

"I've made a lot of mistakes in nearly seventy years," Dawson said. "This won't be the first time. Personally I don't give a hoot if six posses are after you. I'm in this valley to hunt gold, and that's all. I'm glad to give a man a meal when he is hungry, but I don't aim to keep you supplied with food. Not a man who goes hunting around for a gun just as soon as he gets to my camp, like you did."

"Aw, you don't need to get so hot under the collar," Hopper said. "I didn't find any gun."

"Which is probably just as well," Dawson said drily. "I'll live longer that way, and I'm not figuring on dying yet awhile."

HOPPER finished eating and then put the greasy frying pan down beside the fire. He placed the coffee pot aside, stamped out the fire and started to walk away.

"Thanks for the meal," he said. "I'm not sticking around where I'm not wanted."

"You're staying until you wash that frying pan in the creek over there," Dawson said. "I'm surprised at you—haven't you any manners? Using a man's cooking utensils and leaving them all dirty!"

"All right," Hopper said. "I'll wash the pan. Want me to clean the coffee pot, too?"

"Never mind about that," Dawson said. "Made that coffee fresh this morning—it will stand a few more boilings. Just clean the frying pan."

Hopper picked up the pan and walked over to the creek that ran along the western edge of the clearing. He knelt at the side of the stream and thrust the pan into the water. At this point the creek was not more than a foot or so deep. Hopper rolled up his shirt sleeves, thrust one hand down and drew up a handful of sand from the bottom of the stream. He began scouring the pan with the sand. Suddenly he uttered a startled exclamation.

"Gold!" he shouted excitedly. "Hey, Dawson, come here and look!"

The old prospector hurried to the creek bank. He stared at the sand in the bottom of the frying pan.

"Why that's—" he began.

He didn't get a chance to finish. Hopper abruptly swung the frying pan so that it hit the old prospector on the side of the head and Dawson dropped to the ground

unconscious. Hopper's feet slipped on the bank and he fell into the creek. He managed to get thoroughly wet before he climbed out again.

"Too smart for your own good," he muttered staring at the unconscious form of the old man. He reached down and grabbed Dawson's gun and thrust it into his own empty holster. "I should put a bullet in you, but you won't bother me without a gun."

He glanced at the frying pan lying on the ground beside Dawson, smiled derisively, and walked away to disappear in the brush.

Hopper hadn't been gone more than ten minutes when Ben Dawson moaned and opened his eyes. He sat up and moaned again. In his estimation he had the great-grandfather of all headaches. He discovered that his gun was gone and Lem Hopper had disappeared.

"Nice feller," Dawson muttered. "I give him a meal and he socks me over the head and steals my gun. Wonder he didn't put a couple of bullets in my carcass out of pure gratitude."

The old prospector got to his feet. His keen blue eyes narrowed as he saw that Hopper had left a nice set of wet tracks after having fallen into the water. Dawson hurried over to an old dead tree at the edge of the clearing. He reached into a hollow in the tree that could not be easily seen unless you were looking for it and drew out his Winchester.

Then he started trailing the black-bearded man by the wet tracks that Hopper had left. Dawson knew those tracks wouldn't last for any length of time on a warm day like this, but it gave him the general direction in which Hopper had gone.

Finally he came to a big flat rock and in the bottom of this he discovered the opening of a cave large enough for a man to climb into on his hands and knees. There was no sign of Hopper anywhere around, but Dawson was sure he wasn't far away.

Dawson put the rifle down on the ground and crawled into the cave. It wasn't very wide or deep. He found a bag that was well filled with something and dragged it out. Now that he could see the bag clearly he was convinced it was filled with money that Hopper had stolen from some bank, and that most of it was cash.

Quickly Dawson hid the bag back among some rocks near the entrance to the cave. He picked up his rifle and also placed it back among the rocks. Then an idea struck him. There was dry brush and grass at the entrance of the cave. Dawson drew a match from his pocket and started a fire going at the entrance of the cave. Satisfied he ducked back among the rocks out of sight and picked up the rifle.

In a few minutes Hopper appeared. He was completely dry now and had rolled down his shirt sleeves. He uttered a startled cry as he saw the fire burning in front of the cave.

He ran closer and frantically started beating out the flames with his feet. Dawson raised his rifle to his shoulder and sent a shot whistling dangerously close to Hopper's head.

"You didn't hit me hard enough," Dawson said, stepping out from behind the rocks and covering the other man with the rifle. "Toss me my gun or I'll aim closer next time."

"Never mind about that!" said Hopper. "I've got to get the bag of bank money out of the cave before it all burns up!"

"Toss my gun!" snapped Dawson. "I'm not fooling, hurry up!"

Hopper drew the Colt from his holster and tossed it to Dawson. The old prospector picked it up and thrust it into his holster.

"Got to get that money," Hopper muttered. "Got to keep it from burning."

The fire had drifted to one side of the mouth of the cave. Hopper thought he saw his chance to get into the cave and get the money. He paid no attention to Dawson as the old prospector stepped back behind the rocks. Hopper got down on his hands and knees and started crawling toward the mouth of the cave.

"This what you are looking for?" Dawson asked as he came out from behind the

rocks carrying the bag in one hand and covering Hopper with the six-gun in his other hand. He dropped the bag on the ground and seated himself on the side of a rock, still covering Hopper with the gun. "No use getting burned for nothing."

Hopper glanced back over his shoulder and saw the bag. He cursed and got slowly to his feet. Apparently he didn't notice the hoofbeats of a horse that steadily grew louder, but Dawson heard the sound and was waiting anxiously. For all he knew the approaching rider might be a friend of Hopper.

Then he breathed a sigh of relief as a rider loomed into view. He recognized the big man on the roan. It was Sheriff Adam Martin.

"Saw the smoke and decided to see what the fire was all about," said the sheriff as he halted his mount near the two men. "Looks like you got the man I'm after, Dawson. Hopper here robbed the bank back in town a week ago. The men riding with the posse gave up the chase some days ago—but I decided to keep looking, and with your help I was lucky."

"He's all yours, Sheriff," said Dawson.

"There's a thousand dollar reward for his capture," said the sheriff. "And I'll see you get the money, Dawson."

"No thanks," said Dawson. "I wouldn't feel right about taking the money after all Hopper has done for me."

"You're loco," snarled Hopper. "What did I do for you?"

"Found me what could be the best gold strike I ever made," said Dawson. "You see there really was gold in that sand you showed me in the frying pan back at the creek, but you didn't give me a chance to say so." The old prospector smiled. "Reckon you're the one who was too smart for his own good, Hopper."

HOT SADDLE RING

(Concluded from page 64)

good time to shove this foundation herd over the hill, and get us a traveling stake. We'd both drawn our time from the Old Man, and we knew no one would be looking for us!"

Colt Watkins glared at the two prisoners. Sam Burke played the fiddle, and Jode Simmons twanged the guitar for the square-dances. Colt turned his head to look at Red, and turned it back again pronto.

Red Rogle was holding Janet in his arms, and Janet was gazing up into his blue eyes. Red released himself gently and came over to Watkins.

"Janet and I are going to be married, Colt," Red said manfully. "Will you be my best man at the wedding?"

Colt jerked and then grinned ruefully. "Yeah, but I ain't the best man," he growled. "Where in Tophet did you learn to shoot like that?"

"Jack was the National pistol champion last year," Janet boasted proudly. "His real name is John Rogel!"

"And he bought a half interest in the Circle W," Tom Wise added with a happy smile. "Red was going to play with this little herd until he learned more about the cattle business, but this brand-blotting forced our hands!"

"I wonder if they have square-dances in prison," I asked curiously. "On account of they will have the start of a mighty good orchestra!"

Colt Watkins squared back his shoulders, and held out his right hand to Red Rogle. "Congratulations, Red," he said heartily. "Stamp your brand on that filly, and you won't be needing a hot-saddle-ring to alter the brand. Let's get these rustlers back to town!"

Best Western Novel of the Season: NO LAW IN PASS CREEK VALLEY, by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER, in the December GIANT WESTERN—25c At All Stands!

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 7)

to Alaska voters. If ratified, the constitution charter goes to the President for approval.

5.—If it's okay, not contrary to any part of the Constitution of the United States, then the Territorial Governor proclaims another election, this time to select the first set of public officials, including senators and representatives.

6.—Four months must pass between primary and general elections. Ballot results may be delayed, because elections can't be held in Alaska between October and May. Outland voters can't reach the polling places in winter, with passes snowed in and rivers ice-clogged.

7.—Now the last step. Election results are sent to the President. He then officially proclaims the admission of Alaska to the nation as another state. The data of this last proclamation will be the date of statehood, Alaska's "birthday."

Alaska isn't so remote as most folks think. The capital, Juneau, is only about 600 miles by water from Seattle, a good deal nearer than San Francisco, which is 864 miles south of Seattle.

Miles of Wilderness

Of course, most of Alaska lies north of Juneau, with miles of wilderness where human foot has never trod. For that matter, there's a broad, untouched frontier far to the south of Juneau. Take for instance, Canada's western province of British Columbia, with its 366,255 square miles, mostly uninhabited. Another hunk of country, larger even than Texas.

In size, British Columbia is equal to Washington, Oregon, California plus one-half of Idaho! It's a land of forests, mountains and mighty rivers, with fabulous fishing and hunting the same as in Alaska. Also vast grassy valleys, where cattle and gun totin' cowboys roam as they did in the days of the great Texas trail drives.

Civilization has barely penetrated north British Columbia, called "the Cariboo country," which bounds Alaska.

If you're curious to know what the Northland is really like, we'll tell you some things about it in the next Frontier Post, gals and galluses. Here's news! I'm heading up the long Cariboo Road. I'll have plenty of adventures to tell you in get-togethers to come.

The Long Roam

Right now I'm on the long roam up through our own Northwest, where there's a strange, new sweetish smell oftentimes, miles back in the big timber.

That smell plumb mystified me. While in the Sweet Home bailiwick of Linn County, I asked a local citizen about it.

"It ain't flowers, stranger," he says. "That's bug pizen you're sniffin'."

My "sniffin' " ended in a snort.

"Bug poison? What is this, friend, some sort of joke?"

"It ain't no joke on the spruce budworms that have been devourin' our forests as fast, even faster in places, than loggers. The Forest Service is spraying a half-million acres of timberland with DDT. Just a weak solution. Won't harm you none. But it exterminates better'n 90 percent of the cussed budworms."

"Hm-mm. Must be expensive bug killing."

"Nope, you're wrong there. Surprising cheap, it so happens. Costs 86½ cents per acre, they tell us. The job's done from airyplanes."

Elsewhere I was told that what damage the DDT spray does to birds and other wildlife is still an unsettled argument. Almost everywhere, from Texas west, I knew that orchards and croplands were sprayed to control insect pests. But this was the first I'd heard of miles of mountain wilderness being doused.

Fire Finder

Whatever those facts may be, woodsmen claim that the budworm massacre is the biggest thing that's happened in forest conservation since the invention of the Osborne fire finder.

This fire finder gadget was first put to use in this same Cascades region, when a young forest ranger named "Bush" Osborne built the original contraption. It's simple enough, being not much more than a transit set on an azimuth circle—about the size of a kitchen table.

Up until that time, the only way rangers could spot fire was to climb a tree or billy-

goat to the top of a peak for a "check look."

Now some 4000 fire finders are in use throughout the 270,000 square miles of western national forests, as well as on private timber tracts. They occupy high-up lookout stations that command wide views of country surrounding them.

With only a few hours practise, an untrained observer can almost instantly spot a fire and telephone ranger headquarters, telling the exact location of smoke sign 20 miles or more away.

The young ranger's invention is credited with having saved billions of dollars' worth of timber. He's retired now from the U. S. Forestry Service, does fire prevention work for big private concerns. All of which proves, as I've often told you gals and galluses, that there's still plenty of pioneer opportunity in yonderland for wideawake youngsters with a knack for finding better ways of doing things.

In eastern Oregon lies 40-mile-long Warner Valley with its numerous shallow lakes and

[*Turn page*]

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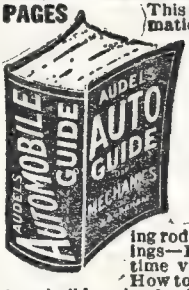

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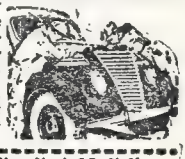

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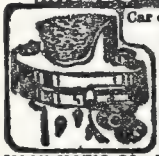

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it's a paradise for hunters discouraged by "no trespassing" signs so numerous in other parts. The lakes are breeding areas for waterfowl, so numerous that crops suffer heavily. One wheat rancher lost his entire crop last year. The State Game Commission estimated that he fed 27,000 geese, 30,000 ducks and about half as many jackrabbits.

There are only 180 landowners in the valley's 157,220 acres, which is near the Hart Mountain Antelope Refuge, where roaming herds of pronghorns are a common sight to passing visitors.

Some of the landowners are hollering for a reclamation set-up, to dry the lakes and so get rid of the ducks and geese. Sportsmen and others are opposed. They're having quite a to-do over it.

There's always a reasonable middle ground in any argument, and in this case it seems to be that Warner Valley isn't growing country but grazing country. And that cattle-raising can be carried on without hindering the ducks, geese, gulls, terns, cormorants, white pelicans, snowy egrets and blue herons that nest thereabouts.

It's true that wild hay is cut along the lake margins for winter feeding cattle, but the haying is done after the nesting season, so does no harm to the game.

Nature's Lessons

I've seen this same problem and same set of arguments bob up for years in other Western bottomland basins. One of the worst mistakes ever made in the name of "reclamation" was draining such bottomland lakes. In every instance, it resulted in disastrous lowering of the underground water table for miles around.

Man learns Nature's simple lessons mighty slow. The trouble is, new settlers lack the experience and wisdom of old-timers, dead and gone, so rashly proceed to repeat the same mistakes. A lot of high-up engineers, who have the big say-so in such matters, are red-eared tenderfoots full of fancy theory, but don't know the seat of their pants from an anthill, so far as practical common sense is concerned.

Here's something that strikes me as interesting as I roam the hinterlands. Those of us who live in big cities, where television is common, are used to this latest scientific marvel by now.

But out yonderly, in the backlands, mighty few have ever seen a television screen, and they're plenty curious about it. They ask excited questions, in a good deal the same way that Western settlers used to ask about the first automobiles, and hanker for a look at one.

Well, gals and galluses, I got to be moving along. Next time I'll tell you some tall but true yarns about the land where the wild goose goes, and the salmon leaps, and where the nights are only 2½ hours long in midsummer.

Adios, also cheerio. Mush, White Fang!

—CAPTAIN STARR

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

MAN'S hankering for the possession of land has been a natural desire —an instinct, nearly—from the dawn of time. Whether it be a small garden plot or whether it be a many-sectioned ranch or farm, the pride of ownership is equal. "A man's home is his castle" is as true today as it was when knighthood was in flower. This desire for land, for a home of his own, was a basic motivating force in the opening up of the West.

Land was there nearly for the asking, rolling away miles on miles to the horizon. The ending of the Civil War gave a great impetus to the movement toward the land. Many Southerners, in particular, their homes ruined and land laid waste, sold out what little remained and struck out for new worlds. Texas, being a big state and with physical features as varied as the state is large, attracted many of these seekers of new homes.

They were aware of the huge pine forests in the eastern part, of the lush land bounding the coastal country. They knew that the Panhandle and west Texas offered millions of acres that could be ranched. General farming could furnish a living almost anywhere but in the arid, desertlike sections. Yes, Texas had much to offer these eager newcomers who were avid for land.

But like any other boom, sharpies were lying in wait to trim these homeseekers; to offer them in glowing terms a paradise on earth, an Eden practically overflowing with the necessities of life, with little or no work to make crops grow in rich abundance. And these land sharpsters would go to extreme lengths to trim the honest emigrant, with false deeds and illegal practises, even robbing

and pillaging them of the few dollars they had left after purchasing land.

In the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS we come upon a similar situation in GUN PARADISE, by Jackson Cole.

"Come to Elysia!" shouted the posters plastered over east Texas and adjoining southern states. "A paradise where a man basks in the sunshine while all nature smiles upon him! Write at once to Dr. Emerson Fralee, impresario, Elysia, Texas!" Other posters, while worded in different phrases, said practically the same thing and gave the impression that Mother Nature did the dirty work while her sons collected the profits.

Fralee was a smooth-talking, slippery land operator—and if the fact was overlooked by the home-seekers in their hunger for land that he might be a snake in the Eden he so brazenly advertised, nevertheless the thought was not discarded by the head of the Texas Rangers in Austin.

Rumors and complaints had come to Captain Bill McDowell, crotchety old Ranger head, and he'd already sent a young operative to Elysia to see what was going on there. Ancient and experienced, McDowell counted each of his fine officers as a son. He worried over them when he sent them out on their dangerous missions, and when one got hurt in the performance of duty, it was more painful to the old captain than to the toughened young fellows who obeyed his orders. Thus when he received word that the Ranger he'd already sent to Elysia had been murdered, he hit the roof. Then he calmed down enough to call in the man he depended upon to crack his toughest cases—Ranger Jim Hatfield.

After a short briefing, Hatfield saddled up his famous horse Goldy and made tracks for Elysia pronto. As usual, he figured a saloon was as good a place as any to obtain information about the golden-throated Dr. Emerson Fralee. And to his amazement, a man near him at the bar tried to sell him a home site! More than that, the stranger was secretary to Fralee, and introduced Hatfield immediately to the man he'd come so far to investigate! Fralee beamed upon his caller—Jim was posing as a wealthy cattleman—and practically fawned on Hatfield. The impresario had a majestic head, a large nose. He was a very impressive man with his frock coat and light-hued trousers, and the sales

[*Turn page*]

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talk he gave Jim was enough to break the resistance of a sphinx.

His story was that a fine group of people from Louisiana and Mississippi had come to Elysia. They were seeking peace and a home in the wilderness where they might escape the ravages of war and the evil deeds of their fellows. Fralee said, maudlinly, that he had their interests close to his heart, that he called them his children. He told Jim that land values were skyrocketing and more settlers were due to arrive soon. Then he picked up a gilt-edged certificate and showed it to Hatfield. It was a land bond, which Fralee sold to the newcomers.

Jim took it all in, said nothing, but he knew there was something more behind Fralee's chicanery than just rooking innocent home-seekers by selling them land whose title might be questionable. Hatfield was no fool, but he had to hone his brain to razor sharpness before he finally penetrated the core of the gigantic plot slick Fralee was trying to put over on the many emigrants he'd sold land to. In the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS you'll learn how a phony idyllic paradise became a GUN PARADISE when Jim Hatfield tangled with Emerson Fralee and his murderous henchman, "Liverface" Dragoo!

The next issue of TEXAS RANGERS will also include CAP'N BOB, THE IMMORTAL, another of the Famous Texas Rangers' stories by Harold Preece.

Fifty-eight men stood on line on the dirt floor of a blacksmith shop. Tall men in linsey-woolsey and buckskins, the delegates of Texas had gathered in the little village of Washington-on-the-Brazos that blustery morning of March 2, 1836, to sign the scrawled declaration of independence that would sever Texas from Mexico and make

her a republic in her own right.

Robert M. Coleman was one of the signers, and from that day on his name, though wrongly sullied at times, would go down in the history of the republic as one of her greatest men. CAP'N BOB, THE IMMORTAL, in the next issue, tells how Captain Bob Coleman, with a Ranger band, practically cleared Texas of the savage Indians who preyed on the settlers, and permitted the citizens to begin making Texas the great state she is today.

The next issue of TEXAS RANGERS will also carry its usual quota of fact articles, thrilling short stories, and interesting departments. Your copy is a guarantee of an exciting evening's reading!

OUR MAIL BAG

GREETINGS again, good readers! Before we go any further we'd like to know if you have a copy of the December, 1936, issue of TEXAS RANGERS lying around somewhere. If you do, and will send it to the editor of this magazine so we may keep it, we'll send you in turn a one year's subscription *free* to TEXAS RANGERS! So please look around, folks, and see if you can uncover a December, 1936, copy of this magazine. We'd appreciate it no end as it is urgently needed for our files.

Now, let's see what the mail has brought us this time:

I am really one of Jim Hatfield's fans. I've been reading *Texas Rangers* for ten years and I've saved every issue that came out on the newsstands. I compare old stories with the new

[*Turn page*]

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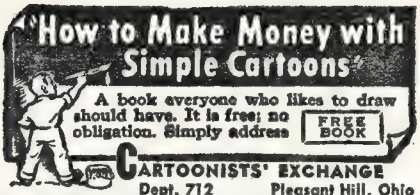
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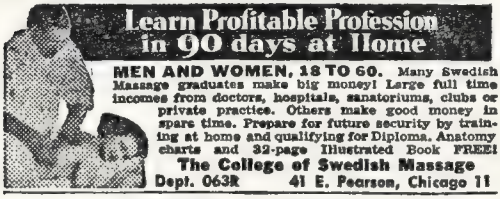
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ones. Jackson Cole must be slipping, because he sometimes doesn't put out stories like he used to. Let's have Jim do more fist fighting in the coming issues. Why can't you print a picture of Mr. Cole in the book, so his fans will know him better?—*L. M. Marcatti, Arabi, Louisiana.*

I think Jackson Cole writes pretty good stories. But I also think if there were a little more lovey-dovey stuff in his stories, some kids (all the girls, that is) would like them much better.—*Darlene Bratland, Verona, N. Dakota.*

Mr. Cole, I like Jim Hatfield better than any one you write about. Keep him the Lone Wolf. I would like to read one story where he would have three or four good rough fist fights, get him almost whipped. If you write it I will read it, because I never miss an issue.—*Obie S. Corder, Monticello, Kentucky.*

My husband got me started to reading *Texas Rangers,* and I am sure glad. It's the best western I have ever read, and that is saying a lot, because I have read many of them. Jim Hatfield is super!—*Mrs. Robert Timmons, DeLeon, Texas.*

Have been a reader of *Texas Rangers* for years and I can't see how you possibly can improve on the stories. I like the reading 100 percent, but I do think you should add a Pen Pal column.—*W. S. Barnwell, Wildwood, Florida.*

I think old Jackson Cole is getting lovesick. The last good novel I read of Jim Hatfield was the "Lobo Legion." That was when the old Jim still rode the old trails and kept me up nights reading him. When I first saw that new drug-store cowboy picture of him, with his hat bent all out of shape, I said to myself, "Old Jim got shot, and here's Junior!" And I was right, for I fell asleep reading the story and never finished

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it. Pretty soon he'll be riding a motorcycle instead of Goldy, so I'll say so long, James, until they put you back on the old trail and don't make you puff out your chest so much.—*Frank Kappell, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.*

I think it is all right if Jim Hatfield wants to take Buck Robertson with him. I also think it is okay for Jim to stop and have a meal with Buck and Anita when he has time. I am 47 years young and enjoy all the stories in *Texas Rangers.* —*Chas. C. McQueen, Elroy, Arizona.*

Well, that cuts it, good readers. We certainly enjoy your letters, whether they're boosts or brickbats—so keep writing us frankly and fully. Every letter is gratefully received and carefully studied, whether or not it lands in print—so don't hesitate to drop us a line. We're not afraid of criticism, as you can see from some of the letters quoted above—but we're glad to report that the big majority of readers who write us are boosters for TEXAS RANGERS.

Please mail all your letters and postcards, to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York. See you next issue—and until then, thanks, folks, and *adios.*

—THE EDITOR.

LONG SAM RIDES THE RIVER

(Concluded from page 84)

"That blasted dude!" Hadley groaned. "He got to hangin' around me and the boys, hintin' that he had a big deal on. He wouldn't say what his deal was."

"If I'd knowed he was a badge-man when I busted into old Scott's office to smoke him, I could have give Fry a dose of lead, too!" Zeke Wayne croaked.

"Let's gather this bunch of crooks and head for your *juzgado,* Gossard!" Long Sam chuckled. "Seein' Joe Fry behind bars is somethin' I don't want to miss. Maybe he'll think twice before he euchres me into ridin' the whole length of another long river to fall into one of his traps!"

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

•

GUN PARADISE

By JACKSON COLE

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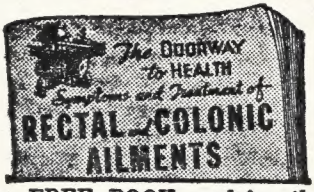

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